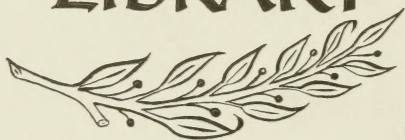
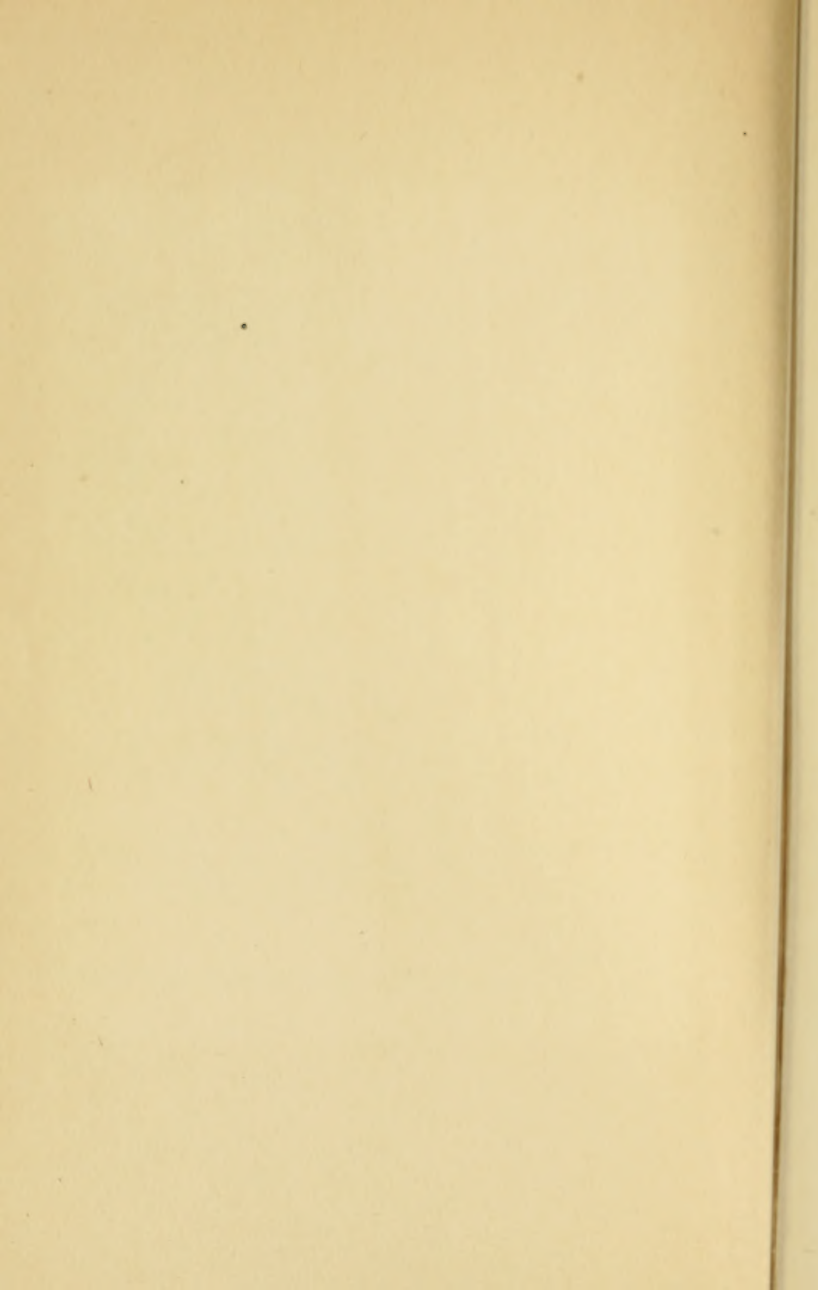
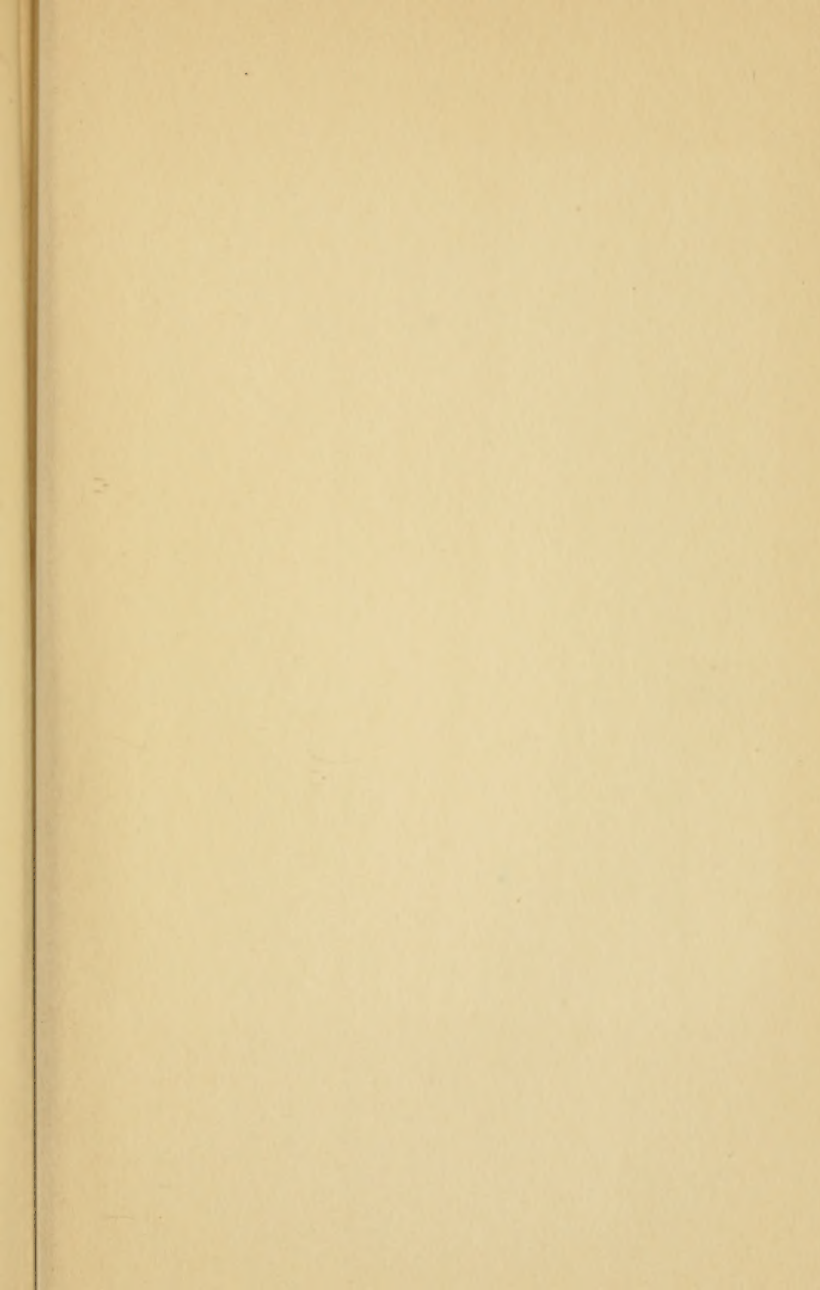


BOSTON
PUBLIC
LIBRARY







THE CALL OF THE SOIL
(*L'Appel du Sol*)

THE CALL OF THE SOIL

(*"L'Appel du Sol"*—*Prix Goncourt, 1916*)

BY
ADRIEN BERTRAND
(*Lieutenant Chasseurs Alpins*)

TRANSLATED BY
J. LEWIS MAY

NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY
LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD
MCMXIX

Copyright, 1919,
By JOHN LANE COMPANY

*PZ3

B46295C

Press of
J. J. Little & Ives Company
New York, U. S. A.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

To
CAPTAIN GEORGES BERTRAND
6th Battalion of the
Chasseurs Alpins

. . .

*In Memory
My Little Brother
Of That Tragic Evening
In the Summer of 1914
When We Two Met
Under Fire*

TO THE READER

*The passages suppressed by the Censor
have been replaced by a series
of dots*

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE BAPTISM OF FIRE	11
II. THE RETREAT	22
III. A SOLDIER'S DEATH	36
IV. THE GRAVES IN THE CHURCHYARD . . .	61

PART II

V. THE MARCH	77
VI. MORITURI TE SALUTANT!	97
VII. BEFORE THE BATTLE	106
VIII. THE BATTLE	120
IX. THE BATTLE CONTINUES	138
X. THE FIELD AMBULANCE	161

PART III

XI. IN SPITE OF THE STORM	173
XII. THE MONOTONY OF THE TRENCHES . .	189
XIII. IN BILLETS	200
XIV. THE PRISONERS	214
XV. THE ASSAULT	219

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE BAPTISM OF FIRE

THE regiment was moving forward to the battle front, over a tract of high open country. The advance was slow, for the previous day had been a long and arduous one. The men were still feeling the strain of a thirty mile march, and suffering from the general weariness resulting from two days and nights in a troop train.

Company after company and section after section, the *chasseurs* plodded onwards in one long file. They marched in silence, stooping forward and giving, every now and then, a mechanical hitch to the packs they bore on their shoulders. Only their head gear was visible above the high stalks of the rye and oats. The war had come! Straight ahead they marched, heedless of what they trampled under foot. This was the first toll of the war, and ruin of the crops. Till yesterday these men, like the true peasants they were, had shewn becoming respect towards the hard-won harvest of the fields. But already the lust of slaughter had laid hold of them and they were filled with glee as they outraged and despoiled the fields. It was their way of revenging themselves for the bitter toil of bygone winters, for sheaves mildewed by untimely rains, and for

all the broken pledges of the earth. Some of them who were reservists bethought themselves, as they used their rifle barrels to clear themselves a passage through these cornfields of Lorraine, of the wheat they had abandoned just as it was ripe for the sickle, in some airy Alpine valley or distant mountain pass in the Cevennes.

It was yet scarcely light. The stillness was impressive. The plain sloped gently upwards to a lofty ridge which bounded the view and where the sky was fringed with orange. As they went forward the glow in the east grew broader and broader and the grey lines of earliest dawn gave place to delicate shades of mauve. A wet mist shrouded the borders of the forest.

"A typical Ile de France morning, this!" shouted 2nd Lieutenant Lucien Fabre, who was marching at the head of his section, to Captain Nicolai.

"A poor specimen of a sunrise," replied the latter, as he pointed to the pink disc which was rising over the hill before them and glimmering through the haze. And he stood pointing with his pipe at the sun with a gesture of mockery and compassion. He was comparing this sober northern day-break with the mornings in Provence where the dawn crashes out with strange and sudden splendour over the blue waters of the Mediterranean or the crimson peaks of Corsica.

"That's to say good morning to it," he added. A long drawn whistling noise was heard overhead. A hollow crash rent the air.

The *chasseurs* looked up with a start. Some came to a halt and the men behind nearly knocked them down.

"Now then, look out!" they protested in injured tones. "Why don't you get on with it then?" was the retort.

At the same time they were filled with a vague apprehension or rather astonishment at the unexpected sound. The whole battalion was on the alert. Again the same whistling sound in the air.

"Those are our own shells being dropped ahead of us," explained Corporal Gros. "When we were detrain- ing, a gunner told me they would do that."

This explanation sufficed for the slow mountaineers. They were not inquisitive, they took things as they came without complaint. The march was resumed. Again the same shrill sound and immediately after six detonations. This time the shell burst at the rear of the column. Another thrill passed through the regiment. "We're getting our baptism of fire, lads," said Captain Nicolai in his hoarse voice.

He was blinded by the slanting rays of the sun. Shading his eyes with his hand he directed his gaze towards the ridge and the horizon. There was nothing to be seen. The smoke from his pipe floated here and there in little puffs that did not disperse.

He turned round and surveyed his men with a fine indulgent expression, as a father might look on his children.

"Come then," he said, "forward!"

"So it's them, Sir, is it?" said a man behind him.

"It's them," replied Nicolai, mechanically, as he looked at his map.

He had not attached much importance to the event.

"It's them, right enough," said the man to his neighbour.

In a few seconds the word had gone the round of the Company. Everyone drew himself up. A great pride seemed to come over them; they had had their baptism of fire. Not a man but somehow felt he had gone up mightily in his own estimation. And everyone was glad—"So that was all, was it? Well then, it was nothing so very terrible after all!" A sigh of relief seemed perceptibly to pass through the ranks.

By this time the sun was climbing a sky of fleckless blue. The men went forward more cheerfully.

"It's nothing so very wonderful," remarked 2nd Lieutenant Fabre to Sergeant Vaissette, who was marching behind him.

Vaissette adjusted his field-glasses and said nothing. He was naturally expansive, being a southerner, and a talker, being a university man. In civil life Vaissette taught philosophy at a lycée in Toulon. But before speaking he liked to have a clear idea of what he was going to say.

They were now crossing a beet field. The wet soil stuck to their boots.

"Clearly the ideas we formed of this cataclysm were exaggerated. It is always the case. The apprehension or the longing with which we regard something that is about to take place blunts the feeling of terror or delight with which it affects us when at length it comes to pass."

He stumbled against a buff haversack that had formed part of a German soldier's equipment, and

nearly fell. There followed a great rattle of water-bottle, cartridge case and rifle, articles which Vaissette carried without any sort of style. His *béret* came down nearly over his eyes and his haversack almost knocked against his heels.

"The Germans are falling back," he said, thinking aloud. Then returning to his subject he added: "In the old days it was the baptism of fire that used to impress recruits. They don't think much of it now, the reason being that they are baptised with shells instead of cannon balls. The danger is greater, but not so apparent, as the enemy's guns are farther away; they don't realise the danger and so they do not fear it. Let's hope they won't be any more afraid of the danger when they understand what it is. But perhaps in this case familiarity will not breed contempt as it did with the soldiers of the Empire and the Revolution whose heroism and daring went on steadily increasing from the tragic day of Valmy right up to Waterloo."

These last words he delivered to the "incorporeal air." He had wandered away from Lieutenant Fabre who was keeping an eye on his men in front, seeing that they maintained their appointed distance from the adjacent columns on their right and left. Vaissette ran to catch him up, hugging his rifle and his water bottle so that they should not clatter.

"Besides," he observed by way of conclusion to his section commander, who, having lost the thread of his remarks, was completely mystified, "besides, the war will be over before three months are up."

The ridge now rose up before them scarcely a mile

and a half distant. All eyes were fixed upon it, everyone comprehending more or less distinctly that the ridge was the objective the company was manœuvring to attain. There was something sinister in this long, desolate barrier stretching right athwart the sky. From its summit, a wide sweep of country would be unfolded before them. The companies to the left and right were involved in the woods. The fourth remained midway between them on the plateau.

The men now began to feel a certain loneliness steal over them. They already seemed to have grown accustomed to the harmless wailing in the air. Captain Nicolai never took his eyes off the stretch of ground before him. At the back of the scene he was able to make out a hedge and a few shrubs. Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion. Nicolai was hurried three paces forward as though driven by a blast of air. There was a buzzing sound in his ears. A moment later he was back again, still dazed. Behind him was a yawning hole in the wet clay, like the mouth of a shaft. The smoke around it was slowly clearing away. A man got up from beside it and began to flick the mud off his clothes. Bits of beetroot scattered all about were slipping down with the wet soil into the hole which was slowly closing in again. A hand, bent, rigid, grasping a rifle, protruded from the tumbled earth.

The sections had come to a halt. Everyone had seen the shell burst between the captain and his company. A shudder passed through them all. The first of their number had fallen a victim to the foe.

Second Lieutenant Fabre and Lieutenant Serre left their men and rushed over to the Captain.

"Are you all right, sir?" cried Serre.

Sergeant Vaissette was there too, no one knew exactly why or how. He was very much moved. With a delicate dirty hand he began to brush down the Captain's tunic. His air betokened a sort of paternal solicitude. Fabre stood gazing at the dead body of the little quartermaster, half buried in the earth. At length Vaissette also turned his eyes on the yawning tomb. He grew suddenly pale. Mechanically he drew out his watch. "A quarter past six," he said. No one heeded him. Nicolai had drawn his sword from the scabbard. With a grave, proud gesture he saluted the mud spattered remains, then raising his sword on high he cried, "Forward!"

The sections once more resumed their march. As the men passed by the shell hole they craned their necks, trying to see the bottom of it.

Then matters grew terrible. Two other high explosive shells burst between the sections, at the same time—there were three short, sharp tearing sounds, and shrapnel and splinters fell like rain from the sky. "Down with you, down!" cried Fabre.

The men flung themselves full length on the ground. They lay close to one another, face downwards. They looked stiff and stark. Shells were bursting in every direction—right and left—in front and behind. Now and again you could hear a shout. But not a man stirred, as though afraid that the slightest movement

would betray them to this mysterious, invisible power—Death.

They were horribly thirsty, something seemed to be gripping their throats. No one spoke. The men were not even conscious of their own feelings. Their sole endeavour was to accustom their ear to distinguish where the shells were going to burst. One or two poor fellows struck by flying fragments stood up shrieking and tried to get away. They were laid low forever by the torrent of steel. It was a lesson to the others. No one moved any more; some got cramp in their limbs, others thought they had been hit in the arm or leg and felt themselves with their hands but furtively, so as not to be seen. The section as they lay on the ground looked like the shell of a tortoise.

Fabre began to wonder how it was he got no orders from the captain.

"I shall have to send someone," said he to Vaissette who happened to be at his side. "I'll go," said the latter. Before the Lieutenant could reply the sergeant was rushing across the level ground, chest well out, exposed to shot and shell from every quarter, the only erect human being on the whole wide expanse, now tripping over a beetroot, now stumbling into a hole or falling over a recumbent body, all his equipment rattling about him, his glasses dangling from his neck by a piece of string, looking about him to make sure of his direction with the furtive, scared expression habitual to shortsighted folk.

The captain saw him and took in the situation. "Back again, quickly," he cried out across the inter-

vening space, anxious to spare him the few additional yards. "Crawl back on your belly. Tell them not to move as long as the bombardment lasts. And I haven't had any orders."

Little of a militarist as he was, Vaissette stood at attention, as upright as a statue. The air whistled round him as though bullets were drilling holes in it. It was the cross fire from the German rifles!

"Get down, damn it!" yelled the captain. "The man must be mad!"

Vaissette brought his hand smartly up to the peak of his cap, saluted, and with the same lanky strides went back to his lieutenant.

He lay down beside him and communicated the orders he had received. Then he said confidentially, "I was in the deuce of a funk!" Fabre stretched out his arm and pressed his sergeant's hand. It was only then that Vaissette, graduated in philosophy, realised that he had just done a devilish fine thing.

For the space of an hour the shells kept on bursting. The scene grew more and more desolate and terrible. The sun was scorching the back of their necks. Every now and again Fabre would pull out his watch. It seemed to him that the afternoon must be getting on. As a matter of fact only a few minutes had gone by. The air was constantly rent by bursting shells; sometimes a bullet whizzed past, flattened itself close by, embedded itself in the ground and sent a piece of beet-root or a lump of earth flying into the air. "What are our gunners about?" growled Corporal Bégou.

"Isn't it rotten luck?" said the man next him.

None of the others spoke. They could not even think. They huddled close together like frightened cattle.

"After all," said Vaissette, "it's worse than people think."

The lieutenant was sitting bolt upright heedless of the danger. He surveyed his men as they lay stretched on the ground, and lit a cigarette. The explosions came so thick and fast that precautions were quite useless. Vaissette followed his example, but he remained silent.

"What are you thinking about?" enquired Fabre.

"I am thinking," answered Vaissette, "that not one of these fellows so much as dreamt of turning back. I am thinking that they wait for death, every one of them, with calm and stoical resignation. And I am thinking that some of them are dead already. We consent to sacrifice our lives, as it were, by instinct, without realising the greatness nor comprehending the reason of the deed. Not one of us, up to now, has told himself that he is facing these dangers for his country's sake."

"Therein," answered the Lieutenant, "resides the true nobility of sacrifice. We lay down our lives unreflectingly for an idea that transcends our understanding. We have no clearer apprehension of the grandeur of the deed than you had just now of your own bravery."

"Do you think," replied Vaissette, "that it was thus with the warriors renowned in history, the men who fought at Marathon or the soldiers of the year 11?"

"Certainly I do," was the answer. "When he is

face to face with death, man obeys either the instinct of self-preservation or else the fixed resolution to devote his life to the cause he is fighting for, a resolution born of early enthusiasms that have become part and parcel of himself."

"It is a military and moral discipline," added the sergeant. "The resignation of the Christian, the fatalism of the Moslem, the stoicism of the pagans of old, cannot offer a more splendid expression of it. This hour of battle illumines the whole matter for me. The most noble thing, the loftiest courage of which a man is capable, is not to die for an idea, to die for his country; it is calmly to give up his life without knowing the why and the wherefore. That is the true way to die for one's country."

"Vaissette," interrupted Fabre, pointing to his section, "look at my chaps. Aren't they great?"

The sergeant, who had abandoned the attempt to keep on his pince-nez in this period of crisis, leisurely extracted his spectacles from their case. He surveyed the *chasseurs* on whom the broiling sun and splinters of shell were remorselessly falling down.

They had fallen asleep to a man!

CHAPTER II

THE RETREAT

THE rain had come. A cold and steady downpour, drenching the trees from top to bottom. The men slipped about on the wet soil which stuck to their boots, caking them with a thick crust. In these latter days of August it seemed as though the quick-coming autumn of Lorraine had already begun to triumph over the dying summer.

The thirty-sixth battalion of Chasseurs Alpains had remained all through the preceding day stretched on the plain or concealed in the wood. At nightfall they had pushed forward as far as the ridge. They took possession of it without a struggle, for the German tirailleurs had withdrawn. The various companies had a few killed and several wounded amongst them. However, no one had yet fired a shot, no one had so much as seen the enemy.

Away yonder, close to the batteries no doubt, the searchlights probed the air by night, as the shells did by day. They swept the sky with their far-flung fan-like rays. The plateau sloped down towards a river. On the farther bank, some distance off, a farm was blazing, nothing broke the silence of the night.

"They were shelling us from a distance of eight

miles," said Captain Nicolai, who still went on smoking.

"We'll make them pay dearly for it," declared Serre.

The latter rarely displayed any critical faculty and he had never been looked upon as a genius. But he was attentive to duty and naturally courageous. He had risen from the ranks and took as much out of himself as he did out of his men. His decisions were prompt and he imposed them on his inferiors in rank, for he possessed the disciplinary faculty. He liked to air his opinions though he lacked the verbal skill to maintain them. He indulged in no philosophising about the world and what went on in it.

Nicolai returned no answer. The distance from which these shells had been fired upset his calculations. It would never have occurred to him that heavy artillery could be used against troops. It was a new departure in tactics that the Germans had thus registered and it was making him anxious. He had just come to realise, for the first time in his life, what death was. He drew no profound conclusions from his experience, but the sights he had beheld during the day were weighing on his mind. He kept thinking of the corporal buried in the hole made by the first shell, and of his stiff dead hand. He could see the blood oozing from the fractured skull of one of his *chasseurs*, his *béret* spattered with brains. He could see the man's death struggles, he could see the poor keepsake ring they had taken off his finger, he could see the letter he would have to write to his next of kin. During the

bombardment, he had carried on a discussion with Vaissette. Now he was feeling drowsy.

"The worst of it is," Serre went on, "you can't get hold of a newspaper; I should like to know what the Russians have been up to these last three days."

The captain did not reply. He was following his own train of thought.

"We never foresaw that they would bring their heavy artillery to bear against anything but forts," he said at length. He remained deep in thought. But Serre did not occupy himself much with problems of this sort. It was the general rather than the detailed aspect of things that presented itself to his mind.

"Here is Japan coming in now; when Germany is eventually crushed we shall not be in a position to pose as champions. She will always be able to say by way of excuse: 'We had the whole world against us.'"

"The great thing," observed Nicolai, concluding his excogitations, "is that this artillery of theirs can have no mobility. Our seventy-fives will soon get the pull again."

They relapsed into silence. The rain had begun to fall. Their only shelter was a miserable fruit tree beneath which they crouched muffled in their long military cloaks.

Fabre dropped off into a doze. The quartermaster sergeant came up with orders from the battalion commander.

"Fall in there, quick," shouted the captain. "We're moving on again."

The shrill sound of the whistles, the shouts of the

N.C.O.'s. woke the men. They stretched their limbs, rubbed their eyes, looked round for their rifles and strapped on their packs. Some wanted to make coffee, but fires were not allowed, and, besides, there was no time. The men had scarcely time to fall in when the march began.

"Forward! Forward!" cried Fabre to his men as they filed past him.

On the right they came to the wood. As they scrambled across a ditch the men fell and floundered in the mud and water. They cursed with vigour and unanimity. The way seemed never-ending. After a while they came out on to a sloping plateau down which they continued this march. Now their way lay along the banks of a stream. Number 4 Company was in front. When they descended a declivity the whole battalion could be seen coming along behind in the grey twilight. Some of the men had come to a standstill unable to go another yard. Fabre's heart sank within him as he saw his section going to pieces.

Vaissette, too, was grief stricken! He was carrying two rifles in order to relieve one of his men; and he was running from one to another to put heart into them. He thus covered two or three times as much ground as the others.

"I had kept a few pieces of sugar in reserve for myself," he confided to his superior officer. "I gave them out to the men to suck. There's nothing more staying, but they didn't take advantage of it. They only grinned."

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"Just marching," was the answer. "You can see that for yourself. For the rest, I know no more than you."

"That's what takes all the 'go' out of me," said the sergeant, who was trotting along by Fabre. "All my stamina goes when I don't know the object in view."

"But no one does know it, Vaissette," said the young officer.

Vaissette was unconvinced; that was more than he could believe. And he couldn't get rid of the idea that his chief's reticence arose from a lack of trust in him.

"I tell you I know nothing," reiterated Fabre.

"What about the captain?" said the sergeant not to be put off.

"He doesn't know either."

"And the C. O.?"

"I don't think he does."

"Well, the General then?" asked the sergeant impatiently.

The lieutenant was about to proclaim his scepticism with regard to the General also; but he suddenly remembered that Vaissette was his inferior in rank, and therefore made no reply.

Vaissette's mind was of the subtle, restless, dangerous order.

"Anyhow someone must know," he added of his own accord.

"Ah, that's precisely what war is, you see. We don't know. We have just got to carry on. We don't know anything; we've just got to give our lives. We

shall not know we've won till we read about in the general orders of the Commander-in-Chief."

A Platoon of Dragoons was coming along at a swift trot on the lower side of the road. There were shouts of "By the right there! By the right!" The section drew aside to let the horsemen pass. They got splashed up to the eyes with mud. The men were leaning forward over their horses' necks, their lances knocking against the animals' ribs. The rear was brought up by a farrier who was digging his spurs into his beast in order to make it plunge and caracole in the manner that never fails to excite the infantry man's awe and admiration.

A Prussian helmet was dangling from his saddle-bow. The *chasseurs* pointed to it. It was the first spiked helmet they had seen.

"Where are you off to?" shouted Fabre as the man rode past.

"Reconnoitering, sir," said the Dragoon reining in his horse.

"But where?" said Fabre.

"I don't know. Shall I go and ask the officer?" said the man civilly.

"No thanks; it doesn't matter," answered Fabre. "Carry on."

"There you are, you see," said he turning to Vaissette. "What did I tell you?"

The sky was paling to the dawn, but no gradations of colour varied the dull uniformity of the landscape that lay monotonous and grey beneath the rain. The men's uniforms, covered with a layer of sticky mud,

the road, the bushes, the hills, the sky—all were clad in the same grey hue. Everywhere was the sound of trickling water. The men had even given up attempting to smoke.

The company now came out onto a broad road. It was a route nationale. The way was temporarily blocked by a convoy that was filing past.

A halt was called.

The convoy seemed as if it would never come to an end. The *chasseurs* sat down by the roadside to wait. Fabre and Serre went forward and joined the Captain who was standing by the battalion commander.

All these vehicles were coming back from the firing line. They seemed to be in a strange hurry. The horses panting and straining. Munition wagons, food wagons, forage carts, followed one another in endless procession. The drivers covered with tent canvas or sacking were asleep on their seats.

"The thing will never come to an end," said the C. O. "However, I suppose there's nothing for it but to wait."

Now came a gun carriage drawn by a single horse. The three gunners were wearing bandages.

"Been hit?" said Nicolaï.

They made no answer; they didn't even take in what he said. The jolting seemed to make them drowsy and they were barely conscious of their surroundings.

And now every vehicle that came by had wounded men in it. Six lay half-dead stretched out on one lorry. Conveyances of every sort went lumbering past:

commandeered carts and tradesmen's vans, their green hoods all sodden and dripping with rain, with such devices as "Au Bonheur des Dames" and "Les Magasins Réunis" just decipherable beneath the mud with which they were plastered. There were hotel omnibuses and inside them all, wounded and more wounded, opening their eyes wearily on the dismal dawn.

Not one of the officers spoke. Each felt a strange dejection of spirit invade him.

"We must find out what it means," said the C. O.

For some few moments Nicolaï had been ramming tobacco into a pipe that was already full.

"It's the convoy of an army corps going back for supplies," was Serre's explanation.

But now came men on foot trudging alongside the vehicles; the greater number of them wounded, their heads bandaged, their arms in slings, stains of discoloured blood visible through the dressings.

A few of the men went forward along the road.

"Hullo, what's up?" said one.

"We haven't half had a mauling," murmured one of the wounded men as he passed.

"There's not a man left out of the whole company," added his companion.

Nicolaï came up.

"Fall in there, will you," he shouted roughly to his men.

An artillery N. C. O. came running along beside the column, passing by the spot where the little group of officers were standing. No one asked him anything, but he knew all about it.

"We've been falling back without a stop for twenty hours," he shouted.

"It's an awful business!"

No one moved. "Idiot!" shouted Serre, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Lucien Fabre dared not speak to Nicolaï, who was busy wiping the mud off his cloak with his handkerchief. But Fabre couldn't have sworn that it was the rain that had moistened his captain's cheek. For himself, a sort of infinite weariness had come upon him. He felt as though something had snapped in his brain, as though some dreadful tragic thing had happened; something that could only find expression in a fit of sobbing. He gazed around for Vaissette. Vaissette was behind with his section, gazing with wide staring eyes at the woe-begone procession.

Still they came. There were as many on foot now as there were in carts. Guns with men perched on the carriages, infantry of the line, chasseurs, artillerymen. Their uniforms, befouled with dust and mud, were no longer recognizable. There were wounded men who had had to be stripped to have their wounds dressed, trudging along half naked in the pouring rain. The morning air was icy cold. Most of the men were without rifles or equipment. Others in the burning heat of the previous day's retreat, had even thrown away their coats, and were now clad only in their red breeches and shirts, the steady downpour soaking them through and through.

Whole companies, whole regiments even, were mingled in inextricable confusion. All alike moved

with the same weariness, the same haste. A shuddering panic had laid hold of them all. You would have thought the enemy were on their heels. They hastened along as quickly as their fatigue would allow, nearly dying of hunger.

A little later the scene grew more terrible still. Civilians were mingled with the soldiers; peasants fleeing for their lives, then ramshackle carts drawn by miserable horses which the military had not thought it worth while to take; here, a whole family in a wagon, stretched out on a mattress. Here, a man dragging along a heifer with a rope; or a woman pushing a perambulator with a squalling infant in it; old grandames dressed in their Sunday clothes specially donned for the journey, pathetically lifting their skirts to keep them out of the mud. Here again is a little tradesman trotting along with his three daughters holding each other by the hand; he keeps waving his umbrella. He is in his jacket, without any great coat, a napkin tucked under his arm and a top hat on his head. His appearance transcends the limits of the absurd, exciting pity rather than laughter.

None know where they are going. None, in the terrible anxiety of the moment, care where they will sleep that night. Their sole thought is to escape from the invader.

There are fewer vehicles now; but the whole road is packed with soldiers, some scarcely more than boys. They composed the regiments of the fighting force that has just been swept off its feet. There were old men as well, whose duty it had been to guard the rail-

way lines. They had seen the retreat in progress and so, without waiting for orders, they had quitted their posts for fear of falling into the hands of the enemy. They plodded along in their white overalls in the drenching rain. Some fatherly fellows among them were carrying children on their shoulders, the women being too exhausted to carry them any further.

There were still a large number of wounded in the crowd. One grew accustomed to the sight of them, but one could not help wondering at their numbers. A regimental train now came along the road in the opposite direction. It was necessary to let it pass. A few men, completely outworn, had flung themselves down on the bank by the roadside. They got horribly trodden on. Batteries passed by all hopelessly mixed up; slim seventy-fives jostling great heavy howitzers drawn by two teams of horses. Every gun-carriage, and every lorry bore wounded or footsore men. Sometimes a peasant woman would be perched up among them. The drivers kept shouting and lashing their horses, running over soldiers and crashing into other vehicles.

All the officers of the battalion had at length gathered together by the roadside. As for the men, they had already accepted this state of things. They had all rejoined their respective sections, lit fires and brewed themselves coffee. At last the Commandant decided to break through the convoy in order to proceed on his way, and the troops began to move onward, drenched with rain, but marching in faultless style.

The fugitives seemed to be rather ashamed of themselves at the sight of them.

"You don't know what you are in for," said some of them with a sort of deprecatory air to the *chasseurs* as they went past.

"Carry on, boys, carry on!" was the reply.

"All the officers have been killed!"

"And what about sister?" mockingly rejoined a youthful volunteer of twenty.

At length the troops had got through the mob and were marching steadily on in the rain.

Captain Nicolai took hold of little Fabre by the arm. Fabre was only a youngster. It was just a year since he had left St. Cyr. The old officer felt his heart go out towards him, and the boy, when he became aware of the tough old veteran's regard for him, was moved almost to tears.

"I wish," he said, "that I had been killed yesterday."

The captain did not answer. He had let his pipe go out.

"It's a disgrace," pursued Fabre. "A country with runaways like that doesn't deserve to have men die for her."

"I hope, *mon enfant*," said Nicolai, "that when you made up your mind you made it up once for all and that now your decision is irrevocable. It is no chance circumstance, such as the sight of this retreat, that can dim the glory of our country or impair our resolve to serve her. *To serve her!*" he repeated in low passionate tones.

And in the way he said the word there were twenty long years of service, of discipline, of obedience to pedantic superiors: of dreary garrison days, of disappointed hopes of promotion, of tedious campaigns in Africa, of winters dragged out in Alpine fortresses, the longing when the night came for open manœuvres in the mountains, the homesickness for the bright southern skies, all the flower of his manhood blighted in waiting for this war that had been so long in coming. His face, instinct with calm gravity, was full of majesty.

"You will see," said he, "that passive obedience, unquestioning service, are to be the virtues of the soldier's calling. Enthusiasm departs. Renunciation remains. That which is our strength in time of peace will stand us in still greater stead in time of war. It is not a matter of a day, of a great and glorious advance between sunrise and sundown. It is a task that calls for obedience, patience, daring, enterprise and perseverance. It is a question of attacking the foe or being attacked after witnessing a retreat. It means that you must go forward yourself in the open, knowing full well how many there are who would seek safety in concealment. It means that we are called on to give our lives for people whom we know not, away back behind the lines, people who care nothing for us, who descend to every artifice to evade service, people who rear ignoble fortunes upon our corpses. Such, *mon enfant*, is what your country expects of you. Such is the nature of the great sacrifice; a sacrifice that is sombre, simple and long drawn out.

It behoves you not to dwell on the meritoriousness of it either in your own case or in others. And if you have to go forth tomorrow or, it may be, after many months, to meet your death, look on it, even then, as a plain straightforward task. If I fall, be resolved, then and there, to take the leadership of your section, or if need be, of the whole company. If you were to fall, I should accept the sacrifice with submission. It would not stay my ardour to lead my men whithersoever my orders directed—to the grave and beyond.

CHAPTER III

A SOLDIER'S DEATH

THE village of Vassinville slopes down the hillside to the water's edge. A hundred white houses or so stand clustered round the church and fringe the margin of the river. Round about are beetfields, a few vineyards, hops ripening on their poles and orchards with trees bending beneath their burden of golden plums.

The fourth company had just occupied the village. Word had been given that the Germans were on the other side of the river. They were indeed everywhere about, among the hay still uncut and amid the lofty corn. The troops had entered Vassinville by creeping along beside the moon-blanchèd houses. Not a sound was to be heard. There was no trace of the foe. With amazing *sangfroid*, the few inhabitants who had stayed behind were sleeping in their beds. Most of the houses had been empty for three days. The cattle, forsaken by their owners, were lowing piteously.

Captain Nicolaï had given orders to barricade the approach to the bridge at which spot any serious attack was bound to be made. An overturned plough, a door, some shutters, beams, chairs, sacks of wheat discovered near at hand in a granary. Lieutenant Serre was entrusted with the task of holding the bridge.

Lucien had quitted the village with his men. The high ground to the right was a key position and had to be defended. It sloped gently down, planted with tiny pine saplings, to the edge of the stream. The rest of the battalion occupied the adjacent hills.

The earliest gleams of dawn were dancing on the stream, and setting a-quiver the mist that shrouded the surface of its waters and loitered among the rushes of its banks.

"Aux Armes!" shouted a sentry who was on guard at the other end of the bridge. Seized with terror the man rushed towards Serre.

"They are there, sir, they are there. I saw them."

"Keep calm, you fool," said Serre, "we're here to receive them."

He tried to locate them, scanning the landscape with his glasses. And there indeed were their uniforms, just discernible at the edge of some clumps of wood that rose up amid the cornlands. A line of snipers were making their way towards the river.

"Go and tell the captain," he said to his orderly.

All the men were grasping their rifles in their big heavy hands, caressing the butt-ends the better to assure themselves of their protection. No words were exchanged between them. The danger seemed more real to them than it was two days ago, when they were under shell fire. Soon they lay down flat in the ditch or behind the barricade for safety, and shortly afterwards recklessly exposed themselves, head and shoulders, to watch their adversaries come on.

"They are too far off," said Serre, who was care-

fully gauging the distance. He was standing in the middle of the roadway, heedless of the danger, without feeling any emotion, without moreover any consciousness of the greatness of the moment.

A *chasseur* missed his footing on the slope and fell cursing with all his might.

"Quiet there, will you," said Serre. "You'll get four days detention if you're not careful."

Thus Serre, the unimaginative and the brave, maintained discipline among his men. Suddenly he exclaimed in tones denoting some surprise: "Here they come in skirmishing order. They advance with short rushes just as we do. It's a rum thing! They must have had some battalion training too," he observed in a voice that indicated some admiration for his foes. "But let's see them charge," he added quickly by way of qualifying his eulogium. "I read in the paper that in Alsace they would throw up the sponge for nothing at all."

One after another the Germans had entered on the straight piece of road leading to the bridge. You could distinguish their grey helmets. The sight of them filled the officer with furious hatred. He could stand it no longer. At six hundred yards—"You see those swine coming on there—Well, fire! Give 'em hell!"

A sudden volley, a simultaneous volley from the whole section. The pent up fear of all of them exploded with the fusillade. They kept firing away merrily. Some of them laughed and cracked jokes. A dozen of their enemies had bitten the dust.

"Shoot straight there, shoot straight in God's name," cried Serre.

He had seized a rifle from one of his men and was taking aim as calmly and deliberately as if he were shooting on the range.

"You are having some sport I hope?"

The remark proceeded from Nicolai, who was standing just behind him judging the marksmanship. "Bring down their officer, Serre," said he. "That tall devil on the right there, running from tree to tree."

The man indicated fell prone, whereat the rest stopped dead.

"Cease fire!" cried Serre. The men hailed one another, shoved one another about and laughed. They were happy. Not a single bullet had hit them.

"Beforehand you think it's going to be frightful," said one of the *chasseurs*, "but it's not so very awful when you're in it."

That was more or less everyone's view. Serre was disappointed.

"We shall never get our bayonets into 'em," said he.

Profiting by the pause, the Germans, who had been hiding behind the willows, took to their heels.

"Wait and see what happens now," said Nicolai.

"But what are our orders?" asked Serre.

"They told me to occupy Vassinvillie," answered Nicolai. "That's plain and simple; we've only got to hang on where we are."

For a few moments past the air had been filled with a great humming noise. They gazed aloft, but there was nothing to be seen but the radiance of the morn-

ing. Suddenly one of the men made out an aeroplane, soaring at an immense height above the village.

"I'm going to get him brought down," said Serre.

"Suppose he's French," objected Nicolai. Serre hadn't any doubt about the matter. It was a dirty Prussian vulture. He ordered his men to open fire. The captain, though he knew the futility of the measure, did not interfere. The men let go with a will. There was now no doubt about its nationality. Its fish tail was by this time easily distinguishable. He sent off a rocket the smoke of which lingered long over the village. The men began to laugh. They were familiar with this old-fashioned music.

"The bird has spotted us," said the captain. "They are raining shells on the ridge behind Fabre's section."

He departed to see what was happening.

The men continued to blaze away at the aeroplane which, its task accomplished, was speeding swiftly away towards the dawn. The Germans went on scattering their shrapnel without cessation. But their aim was wide. Their shells burst about seventy yards too far ahead. The smoke from the explosions, iridescent with the rays of the rising sun, formed in the limpid air six clouds of orange, purple and gold.

An hour went by during which the harmless bombardment was kept steadily up. The men were perfectly calm.

"War seems to be a case of watching the clouds roll by," said one.

"Yes, but where the deuce is our artillery?" asked another. "You never hear a gun of ours."

"You'd think we hadn't a gun or a plane to call our own," remarked Corporal Bégou.

Serre, his eyes fixed on the horizon, was partaking of a box of sweetmeats with his sergeant. The "boss" had never been so friendly.

"There's a lot of frost about," observed the N. C. O.

"The Huns are nearly starving," replied the Lieutenant. "One of their wounded told the divisional interpreter so yesterday."

Such is the sort of futilities exchanged on the field of battle. Neither the noise of the shells nor the feeling of danger prevented these soldiers from eating and carrying on the peaceful occupations of their daily existence.

Suddenly the water spurted up. It rose in straight columns and fell back again into the stream and on to the banks. A few of the men got a wetting.

"They're shelling the river," cried Serre joyfully.

"Not far off us though," said one of the men significantly.

All the men had taken to earth again. More shells came over, sending up the water in huge sheaves in which the light made rainbows.

"It's like the fountains at Versailles," said Pluchard, a 'Volontaire' who came from Paris. The peasants neither appreciated nor understood the joke.

Just before the explosions, a whistling noise was heard in the air. The shells were passing just over them.

"Those must be ours!" shouted Serre all of a sudden.

At that everyone felt relieved and all began to speak at once. Soon the aim became steadier. The shells began to drop in the fields. Some of them hit a farm house which was shattered to fragments. Serre beheld the panic-stricken flight of the troops who were occupying it then, the wild terror of the men, the shells bursting in their midst, mangled limbs, caps and rifles flying in all directions. He laughed to himself.

"They've just discovered shells that carry fifteen miles," said he to his sergeant. "Our gunners will have some of them soon."

The sun was rising high in the cloudless sky. It was a day of splendour and glory. The rumble of the guns filled the air. You could tell that the battle was being fought on an immense front, and that you were but a point, a speck, in the vast tract of blood and death, a mere movement in a measureless stretch of time. The shells from the French guns burst in a hurricane before them. One could hear the German projectiles as they passed overhead. They were of every imaginable calibre. There were some that burst with the sharp silvery sound of rending steel. Others ripped the air with a shrill whistling noise. The bigger ones sounded like the engine of an express train. Some shrieked like the siren of a steamboat, others when they struck rang like sheep bells.

But now, away across the river, Serre beheld a movement in the tall grass, a motion in the barley, though there was no breeze to cause it. A grey line

was advancing over the fields. Bullets were whistling about him in no time.

"They are coming on again," he said not without satisfaction as he at length took cover behind a sack of corn.

The Germans now realised that they would have to take the village by storm, that the defenders were lining the river bank. They took their time. They came on in skirmishing order, lying flat down, firing and then rushing to the next cover. Near the village, especially round about the bridge, there was a veritable hail of lead.

Two *chasseurs* lay stretched out side by side in the throes of death. It seemed as though the same bullet had hit them both. Their companions were seized with horror. Serre himself was moved. The barrel of his rifle was hot. The foe were falling like wheat before the scythe. But still the line drew nearer, slowly and surely, like the oncoming tide.

"They don't give way, the swine," said Serre, paying a reluctant tribute of admiration to these rude and stubborn fighting men.

The *chasseurs* were still blazing away but Serre thought he detected certain signs of weariness among them.

"Cease fire!" he commanded. The men heaved a sigh of relief. They took deep draughts of the morning air that was dissipating the smell of the powder. Like so many docile cattle they bowed their heads beneath the storm. They were lying flat down along a grassy dyke that bordered the river and behind the

barricade. Overhead the bullets were flying in such numbers that they seemed to be weaving cobwebs in the air. For a few minutes past a noise resembling a rattle had been dinning their ears, dominating the crack of the rifles and the vast booming of the guns.

"They've got a machine gun in action," said Serre, getting on his feet.

He was standing bolt upright. It seemed as though he must have thrust his head through the network of flying bullets. He wanted to get his men in hand. Things were becoming critical. The men nudged each other and looked at him in admiration. He was trim and smart and as he stood, erect with the peak of his képi down, he might have been on parade. He had put on his best uniform for his maiden battle.

"Attend to my orders," he cried. "Now, at four hundred yards—pass it round—fire by volleys." As the word of command was passed along it sounded like the humming of insects.

"Fire!"

They fired as one man. Their confidence was completely restored. They had a leader and in that minute they gave themselves utterly, body and soul, to their commander.

"Fire!"

Not one of the advancing foe was left standing.

There was a pause in the enemy's ranks. Then a fresh human wave came sweeping on. It was horrible. Six times in succession they made the attempt. Six times in succession their onrush was stayed.

But their fire and the bullets from their machine

guns were making gaps round Serre. His sergeant lay on the ground mortally wounded. His skull was fractured, and the blood was streaming down his face and matting his hair. "*Maman! Maman!*" he kept moaning piteously. Beside him a man was shrieking with agony. A bullet had shattered his knee.

"Shut up!" said a *chasseur*. "You're all right, you baulk us, making that row."

Serre was like a man in a dream. He did not know what had become of his captain. He did not even care. He only saw one thing and that was the Prussians drawing nearer and nearer to his barricade. He was obsessed by one fixed resolve, and that was not to be overwhelmed, to stand fast.

Nicolaï had mounted the church tower. He had found a place beside the bell that was vibrating silently to the passing shells; an aged owl sat dozing in the midst of the turmoil and all around hung the webs of a million spiders.

From this spot he could look down over all the surrounding country. Behind were the valleys through which our batteries were passing to take up their positions, the village where the divisional staff had established their quarters; on either side were the ridges to which our battalions were clinging far as the eye could see; at his feet lay the village of Vassinville occupied by his company; the river reflecting the tranquil light; and then the hop fields, the orchards, the corn-fields, whence the enemy was emerging; the line of hills from which their main forces were moving forward in deep masses, and far away on the horizon, a

deep belt of forest. Enormous forces were coming up to the attack; that he could see plainly enough. He had sent word to the C. O. that he could not hold out for long. He had also despatched a message to Headquarters. But telephonic communications with the C. O. had just been cut off. From Divisional Headquarters he had received no reply.

"Serre knows his business," said he to himself as he saw the effect of the volley firing. "And his men are good 'uns."

With his penetrating gaze he had discerned some enemy horsemen who had managed to get as far as the river just at the foot of the ridge that Fabre was holding.

The bullets from the two sections commanded by the young officer were of no avail against this scattered and mobile troop. After splashing up and down in the water for a little while the Bavarian platoon rode off again at a gallop.

"They have located the fords," said Nicolaï. "Things are getting serious."

Before descending the tower he threw a final glance in their direction. He had no need of a range finder; no detail escaped him.

At the barricade the firing had begun again, more intense than ever. Nicolaï could distinguish its regular rhythm. He went up and joined Fabre. The latter had observed the skirmishers making for the fords and took them under the fire of his section.

The second lieutenant smiled at his superior officer who came up with his leisurely *chasseur* stride, his

everlasting pipe in his mouth, leaning on his highlander's stick.

"It's going to be a tough job," he said, tapping Lucien on the shoulder.

The youngster felt his heart leap within him. In proportion as the danger increased, he grew in calmness, in mastery of himself and of his men. Some few of them had been laid low. He was not afraid to expose them. It seemed to him merely like taking charge on a field-day, as he had done the previous month in his Alpine section. He had picked some wild flowers and stuck them in his revolver belt.

"I am going to have a look at Serre," said Nicolai. "What you have to do is to beat off every attack. Simple enough, eh?" he added.

He pressed his subordinate's hand long and warmly.

"Bear in mind," he said, "that your duty is always just as simple. There must be no going back without orders. You've just got to stick it. We are never in a position to say that the situation demands our retirement. Were it not so," he concluded, "it would be too easy a matter."

He came back once more, regardless of the whizzing bullets, and with a sweep of his stick he said:

"You understand you've got your work cut out?"

Fabre replied with a nod. He was absorbed in the doings of his section, who were playing havoc with their assailants.

Nicolai hurried down by a steep path towards the village. For some few seconds he had heard no firing from Serre's men, and he began to feel anxious. He

started to run but just then he encountered the *agent de liaison*.

"The lieutenant sends me to tell you he has only twenty men left, sir."

And indeed, Serre, all alone, his sergeants *hors de combat*, nearly all his *chasseurs* killed, himself shot through the arm and bleeding freely, was still enfilading the bridge and the roadway with a score or so of dare devils, breaking the onrush of the enemy.

"Tell him to hold out to the last man," said the captain.

His quartermaster sergeant now arrived with a message from the commandant, two or three words scrawled on a sheet of paper:

"I am still holding the position assigned. I have had no orders from headquarters"

.

"Hang on, where you are if possible."

Nicolai's bushy eyebrows met in a frown. The sergeant was afraid he had made some mistake. He corrected the position. Ten yards off an explosive shell demolished a piece of wall. The captain did not so much as turn his head to look at it. His face flushed.

The quartermaster trembled. Nicolai sent his orderly and two men he kept in reserve to reinforce Serre.

"If I hear anything fresh, I will let you know," said he.

But Serre sent him back word that for the past few minutes the attack on his front had ceased.

"Gad!" murmured Nicolai, "I thought as much. They can't get over the bridge, so they're going to bring all their weight to bear against Fabre."

A *chasseur* had remained behind in the church tower as a lookout. He came up breathless, for he had rushed down the steps four at a time at the imminent risk of breaking his neck.

"By God! They're bolting, sir!" he cried. "They're bolting!"

"Idiot," answered Nicolai, "get back again. They have given up trying for the bridge, that's all. Tell me if there are any of them working up towards the river."

Something had to be done. The enemy artillery, making excellent practice, was taking off the roofs of the houses which came down with terrific crashes. A farm house was blazing like matchwood. In such a scorching sun, fires might easily spread. Nicolai called his two cyclist despatch riders. One departed to carry the following laconic message to the Commandant:

"I want men and, especially, machine guns."

The other set out for Rémécourt, three miles off, to deliver a brief despatch at headquarters, and a request for reinforcements.

"It's now ten," said Nicolai. "You must be back before eleven. I will hold out till then. Tell the General that."

The men pushed off sturdily across country, the road, swept by machine-gun fire, being impassable.

Nicolai went down as far as the bridge. Serre was lying between the bank and the roadway. His wound

was not serious, but he had lost a good deal of blood. On the other side of the barricade were some hundred German dead. Nearly all were lying at full length, face downwards. Fallen branches, loose stones, articles of equipment, water-bottles, haversacks, rifles, made a strange medley. Pools of blood surrounded the fallen bodies. Wounded men uttered despairing cries, others now and then gave long stifled moans. Four *chasseurs* were bringing their wounded companions into the neighbouring houses or leaning them against the walls of a shady garden. They put bandages on the worst cases. Blood trickled down the men's faces and down their uniforms begrimed with mud and dust. At first sight every wound seemed mortal. Coming forth from a cellar an old woman, who seemed crazy and talked to herself, and a little girl, went about with a can of wine and a glass to give drink to the dying.

Nicolaï did not allow a trace of emotion to appear on his bronzed features. He bent over towards Serre and embracing him, merely exclaimed, "Poor chaps!"

He grasped the hands of four or five men who were standing round Bégou behind the barricade. They were all very excited and all speaking at once. The sweat was pouring from them as with tunics unbuttoned they stood, rifle in hand, in momentary expectation of a fresh attack.

"Be calm," he said to Bégou; "reinforcements are coming up."

The word acted like magic and their faces beamed.

"I haven't got many cartridges left," exclaimed the corporal. "I've given orders for the dead men's bandoliers to be searched."

"The gun fire is lessening, you see," said the captain. "Your work is over. I am going to see how the others are getting on."

He went up into the village again. There he found the situation growing worse every minute. The air was dim with shell smoke.

"What's become of those cyclists of mine?" said the captain aloud to himself. "When you send those beggars anywhere you never see them again."

It was now nearly noon.

However he heaved a sigh of relief. 'An N. C. O. was coming towards him leading a limping horse by the bridle. The man walked so slowly, impeded by his beast, his heavy equipment and his leggings, that Nicolai ran to meet him.

"You come from Headquarters?" he called out.

"Yes, *mon capitaine*," said the quartermaster. "I've got a message." He produced it. Typewritten and duly registered, it ordered him to cross the river and take up a position on the other bank, if he was not attacked.

"They are off their heads," said Nicolai. He glanced at the envelope to see when it was sent off and read "eight a. m." "What, four hours to do three miles?" he asked. He was not indignant. Nothing surprised him now. He was utterly resigned and he felt that he was condemned and his whole company into the bargain.

"I couldn't get through," the trooper explained; "and my horse cracked up."

The captain shrugged his shoulders and made no comment. He proceeded along the path that led to the spot which Fabre and his men were holding. It was bordered by hedges of sloes and blackberries. Birds had taken refuge there and were singing merrily.

He found the young man feeling the strain of the long wait. A few moments since, however, he thought he had observed the enemy's infantry moving up towards the river. Nicolaï looked across and confirmed the impression.

"They are too far off as yet, though," he said. "We must let them come on."

He had to shout to make his voice heard above the bursting shells that were falling so thick and fast about them. As it happened, however, they exploded all around without doing very much actual damage. The men were lying full length, motionless, their rifles ready loaded, each one protected by a little heap of moist earth that he had heaped up in front of him as a sort of fragile rampart. A continuous rumble dominated everything. The battle was raging along a front hundreds of miles in length.

"Men are dying to the right of us as far down as Alsace, and to the left, as far away as Belgium," said Lucien.

"Never," he went on, "have I felt so intensely lonely as I do now, right in the midst of all this uproar."

Nicolaï was sitting down facing the river, fixing his gaze on the horizon, and stirring up the earth with

the ferule of his stick. As he unearthed a stone or a potato he would send it flying. That was the sole indication of the excitement under which he was labouring. He explained the position to his subaltern.

"I've heard nothing from the C. O.," he concluded, "and Headquarters are silent. Not an order has come along."

"How on earth can we be expected to win, then?" said Lucien, sorely troubled.

"One side has to be the loser anyhow," answered Nicolai.

He remained for a while in thought. "It won't be us," he went on after a bit, "if we all stick it. That's the sum total of our duty. We have no other responsibility."

Lucien felt his spirits giving way beneath the strain of this ceaseless hurricane of bullets. Nevertheless he kept on smiling because of his men who, every now and then, would dart agonising looks at him.

"The company's money is in the right hand pocket of my tunic," said Nicolai.

"It's all up with us," said the young man. "But anyhow we shall die together. Give me your hand," he added after a moment's pause.

The old campaigner drew his subaltern to his bosom and as he did so the latter whispered in his ear.

"I believe I am the least bit afraid."

The captain rose. His form stood out in sharp relief against the horizon. The bullets whistled by.

"*Parbleu!*" said he in his calm even tones, "and so am I—Vaissette, order your men to fire a volley at

a thousand yards in order to keep your men well in hand—but that's a thing you must never confess, not even to yourself. Sniff in the scent of powder and danger. Put yourself in heroic posture; it aids us to practise the virtue of which it is the outward and visible sign. For twenty years I've been waiting for this war. Oh, I drink to the lees the glory of this hour." The *chasseurs* had just greeted the first and still distant Prussian lines with a volley of bullets.

"*Au temps!*" commanded the captain. Then turning again to Fabre, "There is nothing so ennobling as the love of danger," he said.

"My soul is indeed possessed by a sensation of something sad and glorious," answered Lucien.

"My boy," said the old officer, "every minute that passes is a victory over self. Such an experience suffices to enrich a whole lifetime with glorious memories."

They spoke no more. The enemy was deploying along the banks of the stream.

"I leave you to command your *chasseurs*," said the captain. "As for me I have nothing to do but await reinforcements or fresh orders from Headquarters, and they will never come. I am only here as a spectator." Fabre continued to direct the firing. His men were conscious of his ascendancy over them. Gay and apparently careless he strolled along coolly and deliberately behind his men.

Bullets flew past them with a sound like the humming of bees. Whole rows of the enemy were brought to earth and never rose to rush onward again. Not a

single German had managed to gain the river. But from every clump of trees, from every sheaf of oats, from every furrow, fresh clusters of the foe came into view. On they swept in dense masses despite the ravage wrought in their foremost ranks; on they pressed with irresistible *élan* as though animated by an unconquerable will.

"They're going to swamp us," growled Fabre.

Despite the gaps made by his fire, the field-grey uniforms were getting across the river. Dead bodies sank beneath the waters whose gleaming surface was marbled with pink streaks.

Suddenly the lieutenant grew quite still, straining his eyes in the direction of the foe. A strange sound had just reached him; a low murmur pierced every now and then by shrill notes. It was the Prussian troops singing to the accompaniment of their fifes and drums. The long drawn notes rose up from the valley and filled all the country round. They were singing a hymn, some Lutheran chant, slow and solemn as a dirge. The clamour grew louder and wilder. The singing gave place to shouts and yells. Above all rose the monotonous wail of the fifes. Their shrill tones sounded like a summons to some weird sabbath.

By this time whole companies had forced the river. They extended along the banks as far as eye could see, linked up one with another, company to company, regiment to regiment, brigade to brigade. All the men were running towards the ridge. The heavy mass seemed as though it was urged on by an invisible force which swept it onwards, always onwards. Heavy

spiked helmets and thick-set bodies seemed borne along as though on wings.

"Fix bayonets!"

Two or three seconds and the thing was done. With a short sharp sound, the blades flashed out with one accord from the scabbard and were fixed to the rifle barrels. A feeling of immense and joyous calm took possession of Lucien.

He gave the order to fire.

A fringe of white flame flashed out along the bayonets.

Again "Fire!"

Standing behind them Fabre was imperturbably loading his revolver.

"Close up!" he cried, "close up!"

Both sections were there side by side. The men were handling their rifles, getting into position for the change. Not a hand shook.

Lucien turned to look behind him. Captain Nicolai was there armed with a dead man's rifle.

"It is the crowning moment of a man's career," cried Fabre, with bright gleaming eyes.

"I am charging with you," answered Nicolai.

Striding across in front of their men, without haste, the two officers took a few steps forward.

"Give the order to charge," called out Nicolai who had moved to the right at the head of number four section, "the infantry on our flank are going to charge too."

Fabre turned to his men and stretching forth his

arm towards the foe shouted with all the force of his lungs:

“Forward, charge!”

With a single shout the fifty men sprang forward. A few seconds of wild delirium; a torrent pouring down the hill among the sapling fir trees; a yelling human wall spiked with bayonets. Then the chasseurs spread out. Two groups in triangular formation like a flight of storks winging their way in the heavens rush towards the foe, one headed by Nicolai, the other by Fabre; Fabre hatless, beside himself, sublime, a revolver in each outstretched hand; in front of him, his orderly who had shed his pack in order to run the quicker; behind him, Vaissette, leaping the furrows and bushes, agile and fair to look upon as a Grecian athlete.

Then came the shock and the *mêlée*.

Silence followed the shouting. Only away behind, a solitary bugle was wildly sounding the charge. In silence the bloody work goes on. The cold steel performs its business. The only sounds are the cries of men taken by surprise, cries of agony and pain. Now and again a revolver shot rings out. None knows what is passing at his side as with dilated eyes, the blood singing madly in his ears, he thrusts his bayonet, where he may, into the yielding body of his foe. And immediately on the grey uniform a crimson stain spreads an aureole of blood. A few things in this wild reckless struggle engraved themselves in Fabre's memory. A German officer, a fine strapping young fellow, was taking aim at him. Fabre fired first and his bullet took

effect just as a *chasseur* pinned the man to a tree with his bayonet. Fabre could not forget the dying look in his great blue eyes. He vividly remembered the windmill strokes of one of his men who, grasping his rifle by the barrel, was smashing the butt end of it across the heads or faces of his adversaries. And the dead bodies over which he stumbled as he ran on; the wounded men who clutched him by the leg as he passed, or lay gripping one another in a last supreme death-struggle; the shining steel, the broad flat blade of the bayonet as it came at his breast; bodies that collapsed and fell in a heap as he fired point blank at them with his revolver.

The pall of silence had fallen. Lucien looked around him. Gradually he came to himself. Above, the sun was blazing in a mist of light. On the ground lay moaning the wounded and the dying; poor blue tunics and lamentable grey coats, helmets and rifles, haversacks of tawney hide and grey canvas, black and buff cartridge-cases, bestrewed the ground. The bushes looked as if they had been damaged by a hail storm of preternatural violence. Yonder were several *chasseurs*, standing up looking about them with a half dazed expression, coming to themselves. A hundred yards farther on the Germans recrossing the river or scurrying away over the opposite bank and Vaissette rushing after them, all alone, shouting and firing as he ran. Of their own accord the men had come and grouped themselves around the lieutenant; there were twenty of them at the most.

"If they come on again, where shall we be?" said Fabre to himself.

That was his sole thought. The little band had gone up the hill again; shells were still falling. Half an hour went by. Fabre had been gazing continuously at the horizon. One single thought obsessed him.

"They've only got to come back again," he said to Vaissette.

"They will not come back," answered Vaissette; "for we have won the battle!"

"That means nothing," returned Fabre. "There are only thirty of us. A single company would have us at their mercy."

As it turned out, the Germans did not renew the attack. Fabre could see them across the river digging themselves in.

A cyclist rode up breathless, red, and dusty.

"I'm trying to find the captain, *mon Lieutenant*," said he.

As the man said these words Lucien's heart almost stopped. A sickening fear came over him. The captain, where was he? He had not seen him since the charge. He had not even thought about him. The cyclist held out a paper. Mechanically the young officer took it. Having read it he turned to Vaissette.

"We are commanded," he said, "to fall back before the attack. Impossible to send reinforcements! Nice to get orders like that now! We shall sleep here where we are. You stop there. I am going a little way down to identify the wounded."

Lucien Fabre descended the slope down which he

had charged a little while since. He wanted to run, but he walked without hurrying so as not to appear undignified, for he knew the men were watching him. He walked with long strides over the scene of the conflict.

Suddenly he came to a standstill. Tears welled to his eyes. He stood stiffly up to prevent himself tottering. Then he knelt gently down on the ground.

His arms folded over his breast, a great rent in his tunic, his bosom pierced through and through, his brown beard matted and stained with the blood that had trickled from his lips, already livid, his splendid eyes still wide open, Captain Nicolai with a smile on his face lay slain by the foe.

CHAPTER IV

THE GRAVES IN THE CHURCHYARD

"If you feel like it, Vaissette," said Fabre, "let us go and have a stroll about the outskirts of the village, to take our mind off things a little."

The sergeant readily consented. He was beginning to recover himself somewhat and was anxious to exchange his thoughts with someone with the sole object of giving them definite shape.

The battalion had collected together again in the village of Rémécourt. Thanks to the weariness of the German gunners, communications between the various units had been restored towards the evening of the previous day; after which the men had thrown themselves down where they stood and slept like cattle. At daybreak, which was ushered in by renewed salvos of artillery, they were relieved by infantry from a reserve regiment which had detrained a few hours previously and was immediately flung into the furnace. The *chasseurs* had been sent back to the rear. All through the day stragglers, the sick and slightly wounded, men who had got adrift from their section, struggled up and joined the group. They marvelled that there still remained any survivors and particularly that there were so many of them. What struck them

was not that they were absentees but that any were left alive to tell the tale. Thus, in the space of a few hours, had the abnormal become the normal and death seemed the natural and inevitable consequence of existence in the firing line. Meantime they went off to pass the night in the barns which the medical corps had not commandeered for the reception of the wounded. When day came the companies could be re-formed.

When dusk fell the sound of the cannonade had died away.

"One more day over and done with," said Vaissette with a sigh of relief.

Together they wandered through the village streets. There was not a sound to be heard. The deep peace that brooded far and wide over the fields seemed like a rebuke offered by earth to man. The moon was visible in a summer sky hung with heavy clouds, and illumined with its rays the mist that rose from the ground.

"So," Vaissette went on, "you'll be our next company commander."

"The poor old captain!" sighed Lucien.

He said no more. His grief was profound, keener than it had been the day before. He called to mind the men who had gone under, he thought of the year he had just passed with Nicolai in a lonely outpost in the Alps, of the week of mobilisation, of the opening days of the campaign, of Nicolai suddenly rising to the height of these great events, intractable and fierce as the tempest itself and simple hearted to the very last.

"War is a stupid, clumsy thing," said Fabre. "It

was evidently the best among us who went down. He neither courted nor avoided death, yet he was bayoneted four times, while neither you nor I, Vaissette, sustained a scratch. In battle chance reigns supreme. Death is equitable at least to this extent that it carries off without distinction both the daring who defy it and the cautious who could cozen it. With modern engines of destruction you are no more likely to escape death by taking cover than by exposing yourself. It's purely a matter of luck, and I should like to know, when I come to think of yesterday's battle, whether victory itself is not also a question of luck. The Prussians did not return to the attack after we had charged them. Why? There were thirty of us. And I saw through my glasses several companies of fresh troops digging a trench on the other side of the stream. The General complimented me this morning and he has no doubt received the congratulations of the commander-in-chief. Nevertheless neither he, nor I, nor the Germans had any part in ordering the issue. Chance decided that." This was precisely what had been passing through Vaissette's mind, though he would never have dared to propound such ideas to his chief. And so, not only because he wished him to go on but also because of that love of paradox which always prompted him to oppose the view of others, the sergeant and graduate, set out to confute his lieutenant.

"You forget," said he, "the bayonet charge you ordered."

"No," was the reply, "I do not forget it, any more

that I forget your heroic demeanour, my friend, nor the sacrifices of our men. All these things bring into my mind some rather melancholy reflections. Nor do I deny that there is a direct connection between our actions and the advance or retirement of the enemy. Of that, no doubt, we have just been witnesses. That indeed, brings me a measure of consolation, for every one of us, even the humblest, can rightfully maintain that his sufferings and his sacrifice were not in vain. Nevertheless I say again that, after our charge, the Germans had only to return to the attack and they would have wiped us off the face of the earth. They did not make the attempt and thanks to their failure to do so we remained the victors. It is here that the element of chance, or luck, enters in. I charged, it is true. But I had received no orders to charge. I don't know why I chose to charge rather than to withdraw, as the orders which I subsequently received from Headquarters commanded me to do. Again, that was just chance. And so I fail to see the relation which exists between the orders of a commander, and victory or defeat."

"You do not, however," said Vaissette who was delighted with the turn the discussion was taking, "mean to say that Generals are useless and that their staffs could be done away with?"

"I am not attempting to construct a theory," answered Fabre; "such intellectual dissipations are for happier times. You will allow that these are scarcely favourable for philosophic speculation and the development of ideas. No, I am merely exchanging with you

a few random notions, notions born of these quiet hours that have followed so hard upon the exciting times we have just been through, notions not untinged with melancholy, since our captain has been killed."

"Do not take me for a fool," said Vaissette. "I was merely supporting the false in order to bring out the true into stronger relief, and fundamentally my conclusions are the same as your own."

"As yet, however, we have not arrived at our conclusions," replied the lieutenant. "We shall have the whole campaign in which to form a philosophic conception of this drama of which we are at once actors and spectators."

They continued their walk in silence. Lucien Fabre was still turning over in his mind the events of the day before. He had an acute mind, but being a soldier by profession, the revelation of certain facts, which had passed unobserved by Vaissette, unduly obsessed his mind.

Vaissette had taken it as a matter of course that they should have been isolated during the fight, that the line of action should have been left to each company commander to determine in accordance with the course of events. Fabre would not admit that at all.

"There is no co-ordination," he kept on complaining, "between the different arms of the service; no co-ordination between the high command and the troops that have to carry out their orders."

They had come to a halt. They were nearing the last houses of the village. Each followed his own separate and not very definite line of thought.

"We are too close to the events to form a reasoned judgment," declared Vaissette.

Fabre agreed.

"Let us hope," he said, "that the god of battles will suffer us to live long enough to form such a judgment. Only then we shall be told that we don't know what we are talking about. Even now literary men and philosophers are beginning to dogmatise about the war. Paris, Bordeaux and Montpellier are all laying down the law as to why we do this and why we do that, the things we feel, why we succeed or why we fail."

"They do so without any critical insight and without possessing the necessary data," said Vaissette. "They talk like so many academic doctrinaires."

Vaissette, who had passed through *l' école normale* and taught at a *lycée*, liked nothing so much as having a dig at the university. It made him feel bold and independent; it accorded with his disposition, for, though steady going and retiring enough in the ordinary way, he would occasionally kick wildly over the traces in word and deed. Some of the members of the Inquisition or of the committee of Public Safety must have been men of that stamp.

"And the journalists," he went on, "they must have a finger in the pie. Some of the foremost among them are men of intellect. The rest merely carry on the old literary tradition of war, always representing it in their writings in the same old trappings: light-hearted, splendid, disciplined, glorious, heroic. And so the world's conception of war is based on their accounts of it, which vaguely correspond with what they remember

of the Iliad and with the various treatises on history so highly esteemed in our lycées and elementary schools. They can sit comfortably enough in their studies. But we, you know what we've lived through the last few days. And yet you will see that their view of it will carry the day. When we get back we shall be made much of for what we have done or for what we have suffered; but no one will believe us when we tell them what war is really like. There would be too much hard work, too much of the humdrum about it, not enough of pomp and circumstance, nor would they accept the theory that the issue of the struggle was predetermined."

"It seems," said Fabre, "that our lines of argument lead us to the same conclusion. But I am a soldier by profession. I am reluctant to believe, in spite of our experiences and our theorisings, that the issue of a battle, like the lot of the individual, is foreordained. There have been great masters of the art of war, such as Hannibal, Cæsar, Napoleon."

"Certainly, I don't deny it," answered the sergeant. "These mighty destroyers belonged to that race of gods who forged the world anew in a seething cauldron of blood. It fills me with wonder, now that I know what a battle is really like, that there can ever have existed brains so lucid, so powerful and so comprehensive as those of the great captains of war. You will, however, allow that in the history of mankind there have been few such geniuses and a great many wars. Thus second-rate men may win the day if their opponents are but third rate. Victor and vanquished

there must infallibly be. For the production of a great poem, the making of a great scientific discovery or the amassing of millions of money, humanity must breed a Racine, a Newton or a Rockefeller. History tells us that Von Moltke and Bismarck were victorious over Marshal Bazaine and General Trochu."

"This then," said Fabre, "is the outcome of your ingenious dissertation; that putting aside those exceptional cases in which real military geniuses impose their will upon the world, victory or defeat depends upon purely fortuitous circumstances quite beyond our knowledge."

Vaissette broke out into a laugh.

"They depend also on artillery, rifles and machine guns," he said.

Fabre felt a weight off his mind. His inward vision seemed to have gained in clearness.

"Victory," he said, taking his sergeant by the arm, "consists in two things. First of all, preparation. One must have a complete knowledge of the realities of modern warfare, of arms and munitions. That must be the foundation, that and the concentration of adequate effectives. For all that our Generals must be responsible. Then comes the other element and that is the will to conquer which must inspire each individual soldier. An army whose every private is determined to hold his ground is unconquerable. Victory, when all is said, dwells ultimately in the heart of each single soldier."

Meanwhile they had come to the confines of Rémé-

court. There they encountered a small outpost who had blocked the road by overturning a cart.

"Halt!" cried the sentry. Fabre took a step forward. The man recognized him, but, being a slave to routine, he demanded the password. Fabre did not know it. It is only staff officers and spies that are acquainted with passwords.

"Ulm!" he replied at a venture.

"No, Marseilles," said the sentry triumphantly.

"Marseilles," returned the officer.

"Pass," said the man, standing aside and coming to the salute.

Lucien and Vaisette strolled a little way along the road. On the right was a piece of rising ground commanding a wide view of the surrounding country, fields lying fallow and bathed in moonlight. The faint smell of decomposing corpses turned them sick and brought them back to the realities of the battle. The night was so warm, so clear and so still, that for the moment they had forgotten them. A wall in which breaches had been made here and there enclosed the rustic graveyard. They entered. It was a terrible sight that met their eyes. Two days before a German battalion had managed to push forward to this place. They were caught by our gun-fire while they were resting. There were there five hundred men sleeping or heating soup, or sending to their distant homes letters, breathing hatred of the foe and hopes of victory—five hundred living men. The hurricane passed over them and instead of five hundred living men were five hundred corpses; torn, mangled, scattered

far and wide. It would have been impossible to reconstruct the bodies, the limbs were tossed about in such inextricable confusion.

Five non-commissioned officers were lying stretched out in front of the gate killed by the same shell; great blue bottles were at work on the wounds, prolonging into the warm night the unwholesome business of the day. A big, flat drum had been blown on to the cross above the gate. It stuck on it like a crown.

There were three enormous holes in the soil. The shells had torn their way into the very bowels of the earth, laying bare all that it concealed. Stone and marble had been blown to fragments, slaughtered soldiers lay half-buried in the shell holes. Their limbs were visible, rigid in death. Coffins of ancient date lay broken and battered amid the ruins. Corpses long buried, cerements and skeletons rose up as though mounting from the under world, mingling as though in brotherly communion with the dead of yesterday. It seemed as though the same engine of destruction had endeavoured to drag from their resting place the dead of by-gone days in order to fill their places in the field of eternal sleep, with these nurslings of annihilation. Calm and indifferent was the peace that rained down, even as the moon's white rays, on the livid bodies in their grey uniforms, and the withered corpses of the forgotten dead.

"Who," said Vaissette, "who, when a few months have gone by, will be able to distinguish friend from foe, as they lie in the bosom of mother earth?"

A heavy cloud hid the moon from sight. Each had

sat down on a broken headstone amid a tangle of up-rooted ivy, a gaping shell hole at their feet.

"The moral grandeur of war," said Fabre, "consists of making us live with the idea of death. Thus in the soul of each of us is enacted an invisible drama, as profound, but in a different manner, as the drama enacted in full view on the field of battle. Considered in itself, war is humanity's crowning disgrace, but those who can read in the hearts of the men who urge it, will see in war the sanctification of the race. As Captain Nicolai said to me—and he was not given to random speech—'We live here a life of continual self-conquest. That conquest consists in learning to love danger.'"

Vaissette was lying full length gazing up at the stars.

"I don't know," said he, "whether we learn to love danger or merely to despise it. In either case we triumph over it. War is a great educator. Few men, as a rule, can say, 'I have looked on death, face to face.' There will be millions of us now who will be able to say that we confronted death and were not daunted. We are like sea-faring men who are engaged in daily strife with the tempests, the sudden storm, mists and darkness, with all the mysteries and all the treacheries of the deep. Every minute of their wandering existence they are in danger of being engulfed beneath the waters. The love of peril has imparted a certain grave fortitude to their character. We, too, have learned to be ready to die at any moment."

"But what is still greater about the whole business,"

said Fabre, "is that we forget even to think of the risks we run: so perfect in our resignation, so complete our willingness to live side by side with death."

"The world has always held armies in high honour, investing them with an aureole of glory even when the soldier's chief duty consisted in swaggering about garrison towns in a gaudy uniform and when the military medal was to be won by sweeping out a barrack-yard and its precincts for fifteen years on end. The world was wrong, no doubt, for if human nobility consists in facing the struggle and all its dangers with mind and heart untroubled and serene, then soldiers who ran fewer risks than miners or engine drivers had less title to our respect than a worker in one of our modern factories or an employee toiling in the poisoned atmosphere of some unhealthy city."

Thus spoke Sergeant Vaissette, a man of pacific mind and the son of a peasant, a civilian in soldier's attire, still a civilian in bearing and sentiment, but a soldier by force of circumstances beyond his control and a whole-hearted soldier too. For the same ardour of self-sacrifice and the same determination to conquer inspired every son of Latin Gaul. But Vaissette would fain reconcile his ideas and enthusiasms of yesterday with his experiences of today: peace time theories and war time observations. His efforts were completely successful because he possessed an ingenious brain and because the facts, as he viewed them, merely confirmed the conceptions he had elaborated in hours of solitary speculation.

"But now," Vaissette went on, "now that the Army

has risen up in defence of a common ideal, the same principle entitles it to the respect of everyone. On no previous occasion, at no previous period, have men hastened so often and so light heartedly to meet their death and so, never before has so much beauty and nobility of character been cast like grain before the quickening winds that breathe over our land. Be not deceived. From the seeds thus sown, rich will be the poison that, in due season, will ripen amid the spiritual atmosphere that perfumes our soil. When we speak of France we must think not only of that fruitful land that brings forth the olives in abundance by the shores of the Mediterranean, not only of the vine-clad hills of Touraine, the green fertile meadows of Normandy; we must think of its air, the clearest and brightest air in the world, the air that yet thrills with all the high enthusiasms and brave deeds of bygone generations of her sons; and it is this air which, stirred by our sacrifices freely offered, shall lull the dewy slumbers of her latest born."

"Vaissette," said Fabre, "let's go and turn in. I happened to notice a nice corner in a hay-loft and I told my orderly to reserve a couple of places for us."

"Another good turn the war has done us is to show us that there is nothing half so good as sleep. Perhaps it is to prepare us for the bliss of morningless and unawakening sleep in which Captain Nicolai now lies for ever enfolded."

PART II

CHAPTER V

THE MARCH

ONE evening the battalion, reconstituted as if by miracle, was ordered to entrain. The journey lasted all through the night. The men shouted and sang to kill time. Gradually, however, the noise died away as they fell asleep, one after another. The way the train crawled along was sorely trying to their patience. It pulled up at every little station, and when it stopped, it seemed as if it would never be able to start again. The names of the stations, little out-of-the-way places in Lorraine, were quite unknown to them. They were trundling westwards, away from the frontier. The guard had no information whatever. The stations looked sleepy and forlorn; nothing to be seen save the lamps of the engine boring holes in the darkness. The engine whistled and grunted with a huge effort out of the station. Then came a run—as far as the next village.

In the morning they came to a stop, not at a station, but somewhere along the track. They had to tumble out in double quick time so as to let the train move on out of the way of others coming up behind. The rather austere-looking landscape, shut in by lofty hills and woods, presented a scene of extraordinary anima-

tion. There was an endless procession of motor vehicles along the road. You could hear guns a long way off.

No sooner were the men formed up in companies than the battalion got under way. No one knew where he was or whither he was going. The way lay along a road leading through woods. The commandant was on ahead in close converse with a staff officer who had come to meet him. On emerging from the forest they came out on to a lofty plateau commanding a wide stretch of country. To the left were chalk cliffs which cast a pallor over the greyness of the day and the landscape. To the right, the hills were loftier and the woods more dense.

"We must be in Champagne," said Vaissette.

They figured out the distance they had covered, taking the speed of the train and the number of hours spent on the journey.

What struck everyone as remarkable was the noise of the guns.

"They must be practising at Châlons," explained Fabre.

A peasant came driving along in a cart. He gazed in amazement at the long line of blue *bérets* winding along the road.

"Where are we?" shouted Fabre.

"Languois," answered the man, pulling up his horse.

"Yes, but where's that; in what part of the country?"

The unhappy man began to gape and stare. "About

three miles off," he answered as he drove on, shrugging his shoulders.

At this point they were overtaken by an artillery officer on horseback. Fabre signed to him to stop. He was a little subaltern not yet out of his teens. Fabre took hold of his horse's bridle and walked along at his side.

"Where are we, can you tell me?" he asked. "We've only just detrained."

"On the Marne," was the answer; "the river is three miles away. That's where my batteries are—those are the guns you hear—and I'm on my way back to them."

"But what are you firing at?" asked Fabre.

The youngster took this for the infantryman's little joke. Then seeing he was in earnest, he wondered whether some previous battle had disturbed his questioner's mental balance. He merely smiled all over his chubby beardless face as he said:

"You know the order of the day. There is to be no more going back!"

Fabre stopped short, tugging the horse's bridle, which caused the animal to rear and plunge.

"But where are the Prussians?" he exclaimed.

"The report this morning is that they've got Paris. But now that we've done falling back, we shall get them."

The quiet way he said it all, and the innocent boyish look on his pink and white face, made the news seem more tragic than ever. Begging to be excused, he put his horse to the trot.

"Paris! They've got Paris!" Fabre kept saying over and over again, like one dazed.

The road branched off to the right and their line of advance took them into the woods once more. Fabre had sent for Vaissette who came running up.

"Vaissette," said he, "do you know where the Prussians are?"

The sergeant saw there was some bad news coming.

"Have they got Liége?" he asked.

"They've reached Paris," said Fabre.

"Ah!" said the sergeant simply. Plunged in thought, not knowing what to make of it all, the two friends walked on in silence, neither daring to reveal to the other what was in his mind. They were marching along a broad main road, and now, as a few days previously, they met herds of human beings flying before the invaders. All the people of the countryside were making for the interior; here a whole family packed in an ancient cart; here a few solitary stragglers who had obstinately refused to budge till the last moment; women half naked or attired in their Sunday best as though they were going to a wedding; peasant women pitifully comic in garments intended to imitate the latest thing in local fashion; an old man driving his cattle, a granny dragging along a fat urchin blowing a mouth-organ.

The news was passed on along the column; but the men were not greatly moved. Hill folk take time to realise things. Moreover, the soldier on campaign takes everything, joy, pain, death, without astonish-

ment and without complaint. Weariness gets the better of him.

Nevertheless Corporal Gros was seized with an immense disgust for everything; Corporal Gros who was the purveyor of all news, the echo of every rumour. Nor could Bégou restore his shattered *morale*. Gone was their faith in the Japanese, in the Turpinite shells that killed at twenty miles, in the great Russian steam-roller.

"Our gunners are to blame," said Gros. "You never even see the slackers."

"The Government's rotten," was Bégou's conclusion.

These explanations sufficed them. The former furnished an immediate and definite cause of the defeat, namely the slackness of the artillery. The second gave reasons of a vague and general application.

The column drew in to the roadside. There were shouts of "By the right there, by the right!" A motor convoy was coming along at full speed. Fabre and Vaissette looked round as they got out of the way, and beheld a train of Paris motor-buses thundering by in the mist, covered with mud. There had been no time to repaint them; they were just as they had been a few weeks before on the boulevards. The route indicator was the only thing that had been removed. Fabre could see them in his mind's eye, pursuing their noisy way down street and avenue. He recalled the times when he stood waiting in the pouring rain, the coloured lamps crossing and recrossing in the squares, the wet winter nights in the metropolis, the lights in

the Place Clichy, the two words "Madeleine—Bastile," the glorious sunsets over the Seine and the Louvre, the sombre magnificence of the twilight when the great arch of the Etoile wreathed itself in light. The motor-buses soon grew dim in the distance and finally vanished to sight in the wood.

"Paris! Paris!" thought Fabre.

Still the column plodded along.

The men were hungry. In Lorraine they had picked wheat by the handful along the wayside, potatoes which they cooked whenever there was a halt and which they bolted burning hot and half raw, and those yellow plums that hung in golden galaxies in the orchards. One of the men would fill his hat with them, double after the column and distribute the fruit among the members of his squad. But here on the confine of Champagne and the Argonne there was nothing to be gleaned. They hadn't touched any vituals and they were hungry. All the way along, the men had been picking up pieces of stick and putting them in their haversacks in order to make a fire to brew their coffee, that hot sweet watery concoction that scarcely tastes of anything but the tin mug, that lubricates the human machine we call a regiment. But there hadn't been a halt long enough for them to kindle their bits of wood. There were practically no stoppages.

"Looks as if they wanted us as soon as possible," remarked Corporal Gros.

"Good job when we're there," said Angielli.

Angielli was a native of Marseilles. He was a dock labourer with an enormous voice and a notorious in-

stigator of strikes. Nevertheless he had joined up without losing a moment, and set an example of discipline and energy. He was a talker; but he could act. He proclaimed in advance the exploits he was capable of, but since he had been under fire he hadn't turned a hair. He had wielded the knife in many a Marseilles dram shop, but when he charged in company with Fabre and Nicolaï he took it as calmly as if it had been a public meeting. He had understood the spirit of his companions, the taciturn men of the hills, but he himself was a true Frenchman of the south, with a passion for speechifying and politics.

"Just one little mile more," said Angielli in his trumpet tones. "Who cares a hang? It's all for the 'Sociale!'"

And the section made a great effort and kept on going. The men did that mile, and then another one. Vaissette talked to them. Angielli went on with his tirades. They didn't understand them, nor, truly, did they care much about the "Sociale." They didn't even think much about France. It was all too vague for them. They only thought of their backs on which their packs weighed so heavily, of the rifle that seemed as though it were sawing their shoulder in two.

Rousset, too, was a talker. Despite the parched state of his throat, the shortness of breath due to the rapidity of the march, he kept talking to the men near him, especially to Servajac, the most silent and the most docile. Rousset was continually grouching. He was lazy and he was dirty. He had been promoted cook, and he performed his duties by no means dis-

His body was incapable of fatigue. His muscles were like iron and so nothing mattered to him. He only knew one thing and that was that he had left his field of rye, his sheep and his chestnut trees. He could not go back to them again yet, because there was a war on. What did it matter to him therefore whether he was told to do this or that? Such were the reflections that vaguely came into his mind.

"And you; don't you care a damn either?" said Rousset to Diribarne.

But Diribarne made no answer at all. He was a Basque. He spoke French badly and did not understand the Provençal dialect that most of the *chasseurs* spoke among themselves. Fabre had never been able to satisfy himself as to whether the man knew what the war was about or against whom it was being fought. He represented obedience and submission in all their grandeur. His willingness was the same, steady-going and complete, whether he was advancing under fire, taking part in a charge or doing a fatigue. He did not complain even when he had had nothing to eat.

In proportion as the march was prolonged, conversations between individuals died down and at last no one spoke. They were now nothing but a herd of animals going along the road, guided by officers as though by drovers.

From time to time they passed through a village. Darkness was coming on. The noise of battle had died away. Inside the walls of the dwelling houses there were people who were taking their rest. You

could see lights in farm houses or in the cottages of the hamlets. The *chasseurs* pictured to themselves a home like the one they had left. Here there was a dog barking in the doorway; here a woman driving in some fowls; or a child crying in a house. The men said to themselves that there were people in those houses seated round a table eating soup; that they had a fire and a bed. All of which made their own lot harder to bear, the gnawing hunger, the wet soaking through their tunics, the interminable marching which nearly bent them double.

Suddenly the column would come to a halt. Why? No one knew. No orders came along to fall out, so they just had to stay where they were and wait. Some kept saying, "What's the matter?" The rest held their peace completely resigned to their fate. Sometimes it was a convoy which the head of the column had encountered traversing their line of route where two roads crossed, or a squadron they had overtaken, or again perhaps the C. O. was not quite sure which turning to take in the darkness and was trying to make out his position on the map. The whole battalion stood bolt upright, the *chasseurs*, startled out of a coma having stumbled one against another, cursed freely and recovered themselves. Sometimes the halt lasted long.

No one dared unstrap his pack and lie down on the roadside. If a few, feeling completely worn out, decided to do so, the column was immediately put in motion again, as though of malice aforethought. But at every halt a few more men dropped out.

Then again the men were continually obliged to get

out of the way, to push and stumble against their comrades to allow motors to go by, or a train of artillery, or a squadron of dragoons, or hussars whose horses, steaming with sweat, bespattered them with mud and foam.

"They've got nothing to do, and yet they get horses given to 'em!" said Rousset.

Neither Corporal Gros, nor his friend Corporal Bégou, had the courage to reply. They had no longer any faith in the artillery, or in those squadrons of cavalry whose charges used to fill them with such awe at manœuvres. If they were any good, how came it that the Germans had managed to advance so far?

Towards midnight they were ordered to halt. But all fires were forbidden. Impossible to get anything hot to drink. There was no wine left in their cans. The officers, however, gave their permission for the men to share a box of sweetmeats with their chums. Many had flung themselves down by the roadside, and even in the road itself, and gone to sleep without food. A few stragglers came up and rejoined their companies. Then, on again! The going was harder than ever. Heavy boots trailed along the road, planing down its surface. All attempts to keep rank were abandoned. They marched without any sort of order, dragging themselves along, half asleep. Every mile one or two *chasseurs* fell out and came down all of a heap in a state of utter collapse. Angielli, in order to keep himself awake and revive the spirits of the others, had started singing a marching song. But no one had joined in, so he had relapsed into silence. The com-

pany however hung together better than the others. The will of its commander put life into it. Fabre, the tough youngster that he was, kept footing it along; he, too, silent because he was very tired; but ever at hand, now by this man, now by that.

Gradually the landscape grew bright. The magnificent glow of a summer dawn filled the air. The sun began to dry up the road and to drink up the moisture from the men's cloaks and tunics. Somehow the report got round that they were getting near the cantonment. The last few miles were easier than the others. The rumour was correct; the battalion were just coming to a village. Nearly all the inhabitants had fled. An infantry regiment, reservists, had already taken up their quarters there. They watched the *chasseurs* go by, lounging about in their shirt sleeves, their képis on the back of their heads, their red breeches, very new and very brilliant, hitched up at the waist.

"National Guardmen!" said Angielli.

Of their own accord the *chasseurs* had straightened themselves up and assumed a military air. *Esprit de corps* and a long and severe training made them look a fine body of men, a fine piece of fighting machinery, notwithstanding their fatigue. Number 4 company halted outside a house and barn where they had been billeted.

The brightness of the day was reflected in the bearing of the troops. The *chasseurs* had set pretty well every hearth ablaze and coffee was already boiling. Rousset and a few others were looking after a big

fire in the orchard. The kettles, put on in couples, were singing. Vegetables in plenty had been found in the fields. The smell of hot soup filled the air and comforted the men's hearts.

Suddenly a shout was heard. Great joy among the company. A *chasseur* had just seen some food waggons being unloaded in the village. Vaissette hurried off to see to the distribution. He was anxious to have an eye on everything, as if he had been the captain. The men tumbled over one another in their eagerness to offer their services. They came back bringing meat, bread, sugar, coffee and bacon. A great joy illumined the poor souls' faces.

The whole company, by section and squad, lay at their ease in the field behind the barn. Plum trees and cherry trees bestowed a light and gracious shade. There was food to eat. The air was filled with shouts and laughter. None thought of the comrades cut down a few days since and now sleeping in the plains of Lorraine. None recked of the perils of the morrow. There was food to eat. Vaissette wanted to try all the soups, all the stews. Everybody kept shouting for him. His mouth was full. He had bits of hot meat in his fingers. He burnt his mouth. The physical delight he took in the feast was as primitive and rustic as that of his men. He called to mind how the heroes of Homer feasted and made merry. Nor was this merely a piece of bookish dilettantism on his part; he was thinking how true to life was the picture of the fighting man portrayed by the bard of ancient Hellas, how he had drawn him as he was and as he is in all times

and in all places and how, in all ages, there is no joy to equal the joy of eating.

Vaissette had reached the point of estimating a poem, not purely and simply on its artistic merits, but according to the measure in which it was animated by the real breath of life.

Standing up in the middle of the field like a shepherd watching his flock, his eyeglasses hanging down over his grimy shirt, for he had taken off his tunic, his *béret* pulled well down over his eyes to keep off the sun, Vaissette was ravenously tearing at a slice of boiled meat with his teeth.

"Poetry," he told himself, his thoughts still running on the *Iliad*, "poetry is immortal only when the breath of the world stirs within it."

A great uproar interrupted the course of his thoughts. The sergeant adjusted his field glasses to discover the cause. It was not far to seek. Angielli and Diribarne, straining and sweating, their muscles taut as rods and bands of steel, bending beneath their load, were bringing forth from a cellar a cask of wine.

The excitement grew delirious. The men crowded about the barrel, wild with delight, drunk before they had touched a drop. They drew off the wine into every sort of receptacle, cans, mugs, saucepans still greasy with soup, cavalry canvas buckets they had "come by" on the quiet. Angielli, astride the cask, his chest bare, yelling, clapping his hands and looking like a picture of Bacchus of old, kept shouting:

"Here you are boys, here's wine, wine; won't you come and have some?"

Banging like a demoniac on the cask, he bawled:

"There's more of 'em, there's more where this one came from!"

His voice, his delight and his gestures spoke eloquently of other casks in the cellar.

"It doesn't cost you much," he went on. And the men held out their tins to Diribarne, the mighty dispenser of delight. At a single gulp they swallowed the liquor and with a quick, smart sweep of the hand wiped the drops from their moustaches. Their eyes beamed with pleasure and those who had drunk began to sing.

Vaissette wanted to have his share. "But where," he thought to himself, "does the cask come from?" He possessed a sense of propriety. "It's not exactly honest," he murmured under his breath. Yet how could one resist such a flood of merriment and high spirits. He saw the wine. He saw the runlet sparkling from the cask. A traitorous ray of sunlight was upon it. It gleamed with every shade and semi-tone of red, carmine, purple, vermilion and scarlet. And so—the sergeant held out his tin. But Rousset had filled a pitcher with a few pints to put in the stew. "That's the sort of tack to tone up the stomach. It puts heart into a man. It would bring the dead to life again. Every soldier can tell you that." So he offered the pitcher to the sergeant. Taking the jar by the middle that was curved like an ancient amphora, he let the

wine gurgle down his throat, drinking from the vessel itself, enjoying it with his whole heart and soul.

"This is life," exclaimed Rousset.

"Don't worry yourself," replied Gros, "we won't let things worry us when it's all over."

Servajac vigorously swore assent.

The meaning of these observations was perhaps not of the clearest. But the men understood one another. They were affirming their comradeship, the union which was to distinguish those who had "been through it," and their determination to have their say, as men who had borne the burden and heat of the day.

Angielli, hoarse with shouting, struck up a song, while Diribarne was pirouetting and capering about in front of the cask, now advancing, now retiring, executing one of the dances of his own country. But the voice of the Marseilles dock-labourer was heard above the din as he trolled his catch:

"As I was walking by the mill,
With a fol-de-rol-de-riddley-o."

And Sergeant Vaissette with a most bibulous flush on his countenance, the sweat pouring off his face, a vague, lost look in his eyes, due to intoxication and shortsightedness, holding his platter in his right hand and waving his béret with his left, took up the refrain.

At length peace reigned again, overcome with fatigue, the *chasseurs* cast themselves down on the ground and fell asleep. The whole company lay stretched out in the field beneath the shade of the fruit

trees, and resigned themselves to slumber. The sound of snoring rose up in a low continuous hum.

Diribarne was the first to wake. That man of iron could never brook more than a few hours repose. Servajac, too, opened his eyes. They stretched themselves and looked at their comrades lying prone on the grass.

"You would think they were lying down to get out of the way of the shells," said Servajac.

"I never thought," said Diribarne, "that you could have good times at the war."

Servajac remained a long while in thought. At length he said:

"It's all according. They're sometimes good and sometimes bad."

There he ceased. Conversation between these two proceeded slowly. They ruminated over their utterances. Their thoughts were deep and they found it difficult to put them into words. And then, when they *did* give expression to them, the words seemed so clipped, so sharply defined, that they seemed to distort rather than define feelings as yet so inchoate and vague. Servajac had lit up his "nose warmer," Diribarne was luxuriously chewing a quid of coarse, canteen tobacco.

"Did you ever think we should have war?" he asked.

"Did you?" responded Servajac. Diribarne shook his head.

"You see," he added by way of explanation, "it's a long way away where we live."

And he pointed first to the distant horizon—where he seemed to behold with his mind's eye the steep hill-

side, the mountain torrents and the deep blue sky of the Basque country—and then back again towards the frontier.

“And you, sergeant, did you think the war would come?” said Servajac to Vaissette, who had got on his legs and was trying to make himself look presentable.

“I should never have thought they would dare attack us,” replied the sergeant.

The whole company was now astir and displaying great activity. The men were busily brushing themselves, scraping the mud off their heavy boots, putting on their puttees, cleaning their rifles, washing their plates. A group had gathered round Servajac and Vaissette. The men thought a lot of their sergeant because he talked well.

“He knows how to turn a sentence,” said Bégou with enthusiasm.

And Bégou was a judge. He kept a café in a little country town and he was a member of the town council.

“You don’t think of the awfulness of it when you’re not under fire,” remarked Servajac. “You fancy you’ve been at the manœuvres and think no more about it.”

And that indeed is one of the mercies of the tragedy. In the intervals that divide the acts, the tragedy ceases to be real, even for those who take part in it.

“No,” Servajac repeated, “you don’t trouble about the war; you just carry on.”

The rest agreed. No doubt he was not capable of giving expression to the common sentiment, and yet his words echoed vaguely what in a dim, confused way

was in the minds of them all. It was left to Vaissette, who was a psychologist, to disentangle and define.

"What strikes you as remarkable," he said, "is that you do not keep saying to yourselves, 'I am fighting for France,' and that you are not more excited, more anxious, not only between whiles, but even when you're in the thick of the fighting. You wonder, too, how it is you don't feel more bitter against the enemy."

"That's so," said Servajac.

"I'll tell you why it is," said Vaissette. "The day you put on that uniform, when the church bells of every village, when every town-crier in France, were giving warning of the mobilisation, you gave yourself up wholly to your country. We all do. We haven't got to think about things any more. It wouldn't be any good. We are just a part of the great machine. We are ourselves no longer. Our souls belong to the country. Do you see what I mean?"

They didn't all see, but they nodded assent.

"What are you fighting for, Diribarne?" continued Vaissette.

Diribarne made a vague gesture. He couldn't put his answer into words; but he knew right enough. But Rousset put in his spoke.

"Because they attacked us," he said.

"No doubt," answered the sergeant; "but that's not all. Why is it that, being attacked, this country of ours is determined to resist to the death?"

"In order that wars may cease," said Angielli.

"Ay," said Diribarne, who had found his answer,

“so that they shan’t keep on pestering us, so that we shall be masters in our own house.”

The utterance of Corporal Gros was sublime in its simplicity, its candour and its truth.

“We’ve got to fight, hang it all, because we mean to be on the top, because we’re not going to let them go on saying they’re better men than we are.”

“What I joined up for,” said Pluchard firmly, “was to get back Alsace.”

Pluchard, who came from Montmartre, was a mechanic in civil life.

“What do you think about it, Servajac?” asked the sergeant.

“There’s a certain amount of truth in everything that’s been said,” he answered. “For my part, I never asked myself why we were fighting. I only said, ‘It’s we who are in the right, because we are France. So I’ll go and get killed if I’ve got to.’ That’s what I think about it.”

“Good chaps!” said Vaissette to himself, and he felt his heart within him just as simple as theirs, just as humble, just as resolute in service and in sacrifice.

CHAPTER VI

MORITURI TE SALUTANT!

“VAISSETTE,” said Lucien Fabre, “I’ve a lot of things to tell you. I’ve just been seeing the Commandant and I’ve got some important news. Come along and have a smoke.”

Dawn was breaking, and the forest was filled with a soft green radiance. On the evening of the previous day, the battalion had resumed its march. They were now close to the firing line. You could hear not only the dull rumble of the battle but the bursting of the German shells and the detonations of our guns. You could distinguish the different sounds. The batteries were firing steadily, without intermission. A great artillery duel was certainly in progress. Along the road regiment followed regiment without a break. Ammunition was given out with reckless prodigality.

All night long the *chasseurs* had been making their way through the forest paths, ankle-deep in mud. The roads had to be kept clean for the artillery, ambulance waggons and vehicles going to and from the firing line. They had now come to a halt. Seated on the damp ground, the men watched the outline of the trees grow clearer and clearer against the grey light of the dawn. They were tired. Some munched their bread rations,

others dropped off into a doze, shoulder to shoulder or back to back, like children.

Fabre and Vaissette went on a few paces, away from the line of route. The twigs lashed their faces and besprinkled them with dew. The ground dropped suddenly down into a hollow that grew deeper and deeper as they proceeded. The trees there were of greater age, immemorial oaks, trunks of trees that had been felled some weeks before stretched their length upon the ground. Upon one of these, moss-covered already, they sat down.

"Vaissette," said Fabre, "the Commandant has just had his orders from Headquarters. We halt here two hours. But first of all I must tell you that you have been promoted—2nd Lieutenant."

"Oh! *mon lieutenant?*" said Vaissette. He could find no other words to reply; but he flushed with pleasure.

"No more '*mon lieutenant*,' answered Fabre. "We were friends before, we are now comrades. That's the way in the army. Everything there is the opposite to what it is in ordinary life and seems an outrage on common-sense."

"Not everything," protested Vaissette.

"There you are," rejoined Fabre, "already inoculated with militarism now that you're an officer. No, clearly not everything, since they've made you an officer. Well, I was only chaffing."

"The whole thing certainly looks on the face of it like an outrage on common-sense, to go no farther than our *raison d'être*. What must they be thinking of us

in Sirius, since here we are, all collected together for the sole purpose of systematically slaughtering as many as possible of our fellow-creatures for the sole reason that they wear a grey helmet instead of a blue *béret* or a red *képi*, that many of them wear gold spectacles instead of eyeglasses—like mine, and that they shout '*Vorwaerts*' instead of '*En avant*.'"

Thus did Vaissette, who had hardly recovered from his excitement, give full rein to his passion for enquiry and dissertation. He also deemed that, being now a second lieutenant, he could indulge his proclivity with greater confidence and authority. Fabre did not interrupt. He was deep in thought and was not listening.

"That, however," Vaissette went on, "would be to take a very superficial view of the matter. The things we are really fighting about are far deeper, far less obvious to the view, abstract questions of political economy, for example, racial differences, divergencies of taste and of ideals, and these causes have a rational basis. Meanwhile what alarms me are my responsibilities; I shall never be equal to the task."

"You are joking," said Fabre. "Our duties as company commanders are as humble as they are grand. Tomorrow, as yesterday, it will be enough for you to see to the material details of your section; but keep all the same a steady heart under fire and a moral ascendancy over your men. That is all I ask of you. For the resolution of a hundred soldiers to conquer and die is in the soul of the subaltern who commands them. Similarly our determination is in the heart of our Com-

mandant. Thus a great leader has victory first of all within himself and instils it into the hearts of the millions under his command before he finally wins it on the field of battle."

Lucien Fabre was puffing away like an old campaigner. He knocked the ashes out against his heel and filled up again.

"The second piece of news," he went on, "is that I'm promoted full lieutenant and retain command of the company. Next, and most important of all, the Government has betaken itself to Bordeaux; but the Prussians have not got to Paris. The decisive battle has begun and before many hours are over we shall be in it."

"And then," he added, in graver tones, "we shall be in it to the death. I have told the O.C. I would answer for my men. I need tell you no more."

The words were almost commonplace. They were spoken quite calmly, in subdued tones. There was no straining after effect, nothing theatrical about the scene or the utterance. The guns went on with their monotonous booming, the men snored unconcernedly. A sudden thrill seemed to pass through the two men. Their eyes grew bright. They had turned a little pale. They were imbued with a cold and implacable resolution.

"I have an order of the day from the Commander-in-Chief," said Fabre. "Let us go and read it to the men."

They both got up and went back to their company across the uneven ground. They seemed to have

grown, alike in age and stature. There was an added air of weightiness and determination in their stride. Fabre called his orderly.

"Here," he said, "here is a piece of silver braid. Stitch the stripe on my tunic sleeve. And take the sergeant's stripes off 2nd Lieutenant Vaissette's tunic and sew on one of these in their place."

The *chasseur* was dumbfounded. Such a startling succession of events filled him with amazement. Without a word he undid his pack, fished out his needle and thread and produced an enormous knife from his pocket. He quickly performed his task. The workmanship was not elegant, but it was sound. The new stripe on Lucien's sleeve shone out brightly in contrast with the other one, now grey and faded. The narrow braid on Vaissette's coat showed up conspicuously on the patch whence his sergeant's stripes had been removed.

The news quickly circulated among the men. The company were ordered to fall in.

"I have something to say to you," said Fabre.

The men drew closer together, shoving against each other, grouping themselves round in a circle as though for a lecture. The lieutenant addressed them in quite ordinary tones. Nothing could have been less ceremonious.

"Comrades," he said, "I present to you your new officer, 2nd Lieutenant Vaissette. I take over the command of Number 4 Company and I look for the same loyal service that Captain Nicolai would have received from you."

And now the men perceived that the moment was a solemn one. They beheld anew the charge in which they had taken part a few days ago. They called to mind their captain.

"Good Lord," exclaimed Angielli under his breath, "good Lord!"

"Now," Fabre went on, raising his voice a little, "listen carefully to what I am going to say. The Germans have pushed on thus far. They have invaded a part of France. Yesterday the battle on which the country's fate depends was begun."

Fabre's voice shook a little. The men were breathing quickly.

"*Mes enfants*," he began again. Many a man among them was old enough to be his father. But for this reason, the phrase assumed its full measure of authority and affection.

In other circumstances he would have spoken at greater length. He knew by experience how men can be affected by words. But today things were different. Rhetoric would have been out of place. He spoke in low, restrained, stifled tones which stirred his hearers to their very depths. They pressed around their leader, with drawn faces and open mouths. The other companies were hidden by the mist and the curtain of trees. The solitude was complete. The silence was broken only by the sound of the guns.

"What a phalanx of gladiators," murmured Vaissette.

"In a few hours," continued Fabre, "we shall be fighting again. The struggle will be fiercer than any

of the battles in which we have hitherto borne a part. When the time comes your sole thoughts must be to hold on and not to expose yourselves, to advance with caution, to shoot straight, to charge when bidden, and to obey the word of command. You will think only of doing your duty as soldiers. The time has now come when you must make up your minds to lay down your lives if necessary."

The words were simple and suited to simple souls. Their cadence and their meaning found a way to their hearts. And Fabre, too, was but the humble interpreter of the soul, the genius of his country. In his accents spoke the voice of the nation, the voice that rang so authoritatively in the ears of these men. It was the voice of France calling to them, in tones that would not be denied, the voice of her hills, her mists, her plains, her woods, her rivers, her mountains, her radiant skies, her cities and their suburbs, the voice of every village and every grange throughout the land. It was a breath from out the storied past that stole above them, laden with the memories of a hundred generations of martyrs, from the cohorts of Marius, who overthrew the Cimbri, down to the heroic regiments of Wimpfen, who were wiped out in that last gallant stand amid the shambles of Sedan. With all these spoils of time the wind of that day was enriched. The memory of them came thronging through the waving branches and dancing leaves, it was heard in the young officer's voice, and in the ceaseless rumble of the guns. A thrill of emotion had stirred the whole company. And the same invisible influence it was that uplifted the battalion, all

the battalions of all the regiments, all the divisions and all the armies along that far flung battle line in which they were about to take their stand.

"Comrades," Fabre went on, "I see that you have felt in your hearts that it is happiness to die for France."

The rest was silence. His men had understood. Servajac had seen again a high upland in the Cevennes and the windswept chestnut trees. Angielli, Marseilles and its taverns afire with political disputes; Rousset, the vines and olives basking in the light of the sun. Pluchard, the cabarets of La Butte, the Moulin de la Galette and the Sunday crowds taking their outings on the banks of the Marne; Diribarne, the doves on the wing beneath the pale green autumn skies among the glens and mountain tops of the Pyrenees. Each beheld what, for him, was France, and what made her dear to him. And it was all vague and shadowy, as vague as the memory of the parents and the loved ones they had left behind them. All these things came thronging in upon them, dim and indistinct, as the voice of their country calling them to arms. But their determination was clear and definite. They would die for her, if need were, tonight or tomorrow. And this was why France could not be conquered.

Again Lieutenant Lucien Fabre said:

"Comrades."

Then he pulled himself up. Henceforth he spoke as a commander to his men. He spoke to those who were going to die. To the martyrs, to the elect of the sons of France.

"Men," he said. "I am about to read you the order of the day of the Commander-in-Chief."

He paused to take breath and unfolded the paper on which, a little while ago he had written down a few sentences at the Commandant's dictation. His voice had grown more incisive, his mode of speech more abrupt. He was engaged in the performance of his duty. The men, trained in the strict and splendid discipline of the battalion, had drawn themselves up and stood stiffly at attention. When Fabre pronounced the words, "*Ordre du jour aux Armées*," they all brought their hands smartly to the salute.

Then Lucien Fabre read as follows:

"At this hour, when we are about to engage in a battle on which depends the safety of the country, it behoves me to remind every man that there must be no more looking backward. Every effort must be made to attack and repel the foe. Troops which find themselves unable to go forward must at all costs hold the ground they have won and die where they stand rather than yield an inch."

Second Lieutenant Vaissette, who had been wiping his glasses, remarked that there was not a man but had tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER VII

BEFORE THE BATTLE

THE third and fourth companies were waiting just inside the fringe of a small wood. The silence was as profound as the darkness. But the men did not sleep well. They had to attack at dawn. The enemy was before them, about half a mile away, on the hillcrest. They were only separated from them by a piece of undulating ground and a stream which was held by the outposts of the two first companies forming the first division. Little by little, however, sleep asserted its sway.

The men knew well enough that, in a few hours' time, many of them would be numbered with the dead. Nevertheless they slept. The officers of the division, Companies 3 and 4, were awaiting events together. Fabre and Vaissette, Lieutenant d'Aubres and Captain de Quéré.

Vaissette that night felt more talkative than ever. He was assailed with many legions of strange fantasies and, for once in a way, his thoughts had no sequence or coherence.

"This great European conflict," said he, "is the most terrible upheaval the world has ever witnessed. What henceforth shall we think of Cannes or Marignan?"

"If I am killed," he went on, "my mother will get a bigger pension, now that I'm an officer. That's one consolation."

Fabre's head seemed too heavy for him; so many and diverse were the thoughts and memories that burdened it. Those moments were the most pregnant of his whole life, for he felt that he was fated to die on the morrow.

He was twenty years old. Three weeks ago he was but a child. A few days had transformed him into a man. So great had been the effect of his first experiences of battle, of the drama of war beheld in all its naked realism. He had charged the foe; he had found his captain dead, yet with a smile on his lips; he had led his men into the firing line; and, now, he bore upon his shoulders a commander's responsibilities, he was the arbiter of their sacrifice and the disposer of a hundred human lives. And Fabre scrupulously examined, not indeed his conscience, for that was clear, but his thoughts. Until now his own individuality had been somewhat in the background and he took himself severely to task for it. He had hitherto been inclined, though in all good faith, to search for truth in the notions of men of extremist and paradoxical opinions. He had been too much influenced by others. He had partly adopted the multifarious tenets of all the many doctrinaries with whom he had come in contact. It had been an effort of sincerity on his part and also the action of a youthful intellect readily receptive of ideas. Perhaps, also, a desire to fall in with the views of his interlocutor was partly responsible for his attitude of

mind. He had often gone more than half-way to meet the ideas of others, influenced by a sort of intellectual coquetry, and actuated by real goodness of heart quite as much as by an instructive desire to gain affection. His uprightness had preserved him from the dangers common to men of this cast of mind, and it was certainly to leave behind him after his death a delightful memory of himself that he did not appear, did not feel, quite the same towards Vaissette as towards Captain de Quéré.

Captain de Quéré was in command of the third company of the battalion which was due to go into action at the same time as Fabre's company. He was just now seated at the young man's side. His limbs were trembling; an attack of fever, one of those malarial disorders one contracts in the colonies, had laid him low in body, but had not quelled his spirit. He was a strange figure of a soldier. It had been his ambition to become a priest, but a longing to be up and doing, an irrepressible desire for a life of action, had sent him into the army. Nevertheless he had remained a monk, a most unbending anchorite in thought and deed. He was a man of brilliant culture. There was nothing in the realm of philosophy or letters that was unfamiliar to him; but his real love was centred on the facts of the XVII century and the Latin writers. He entered into the spirit of the XVII century; he entered into all the conflicting passions of the day and could still nourish a whole-hearted antipathy to Pascal. He was by no means uncommunicative and loved a discussion. But admirable as was his mental outfit, he was prone to

dogmatize and lacked the critical faculty. He beheld things without any shades or gradations of tone; they were black or white and as clear and precise as his intellectual armoury or his religious beliefs. He had the eyes of a mystic, and the world and the social order as he beheld them were but the reflection of his own soul. The world he lived in was the world of two hundred years ago. His France was the France of the treaty of Nimeguen, when the reign of Louis XIV was at the height of its pomp and splendour. The army had more to do with the laying out of the Gardens of Versailles than any other public body: its commanders would lead it across the Rhine as gloriously as on the 12th June, 1672.

Captain de Quéré was a native of Brittany. Fifteen years beneath the burning skies of Africa had not dissipated the dreamy mistiness of his eyes. His classicism was aglow with the romanticism of the Vicomte de Châteaubriand. Furthermore he was warmly sympathetic towards the Company of Jesus, of which his brother was a member, and some of his friends used jokingly to tell him that he was nothing more or less than a Jesuit clad in a gerkin and girt with a sword. He had no fear tonight, and practically no cares. For his own personal safety, for his much mortified body he had no anxiety; he had none for his country for he had no doubts as to the issue of the battle. He believed in the invincibility of our arms, in the purging away of our own sins in blood and fire and he believed that it was France's destiny to redeem the other nations of

the world *ad maiorem Dei Gloriam*. Thus Captain de Quéré's mind was serene and untroubled.

"They will go under," he said decisively.

D'Aubres, his lieutenant, a little dandified Provençal aristocrat, rather vain and foolish, thought so too. His intellectual equipment and his line of argument were similar to Serre's.

"I wouldn't mind betting," he said, "that the Cossacks are at the gates of Berlin, and I guess the British Fleet has sunk every battleship the Germans had in the Baltic and the North Sea."

It thus befel that Lieutenant d'Aubres and Captain de Quéré entertained similar opinions. In the case of the former, however, they were dictated by foolishness and vanity; with the latter it was perhaps due to a lack of the critical faculty. Be that as it may, his range of vision, transcending the shallow notions of the passing hour beheld with a mystic clearness of insight the living realities of the future.

The four officers were seated on the ground, protected by their cloaks from the rising mist. They spoke in low tones in order not to waken the sleeping men, or mar the deep silence of the night.

Suddenly a star-shell sent up from the hostile lines, lit up the borders of the forest with its vivid gleam. Quéré got up. His tall and bony form made him look like Don Quixote.

"How slowly the hours pass when you are waiting to attack," said Vaissette. The captain made a gesture that seemed to say, "What does it matter?"

"Do you think they will be crushed, Captain?" asked Lucien Fabre.

"Do you suppose me capable of doubting the destiny of my country?" said Quéré proudly. "I should be angry with myself for asking myself such a question, particularly before attacking!"

"Well, I really do not know," said Vaissette; "but I adopt as my own, in this hour of crisis, the words of William of Nassau, surnamed the Silent, who founded the Dutch Republic. He deemed that hope was not a necessary condition for undertaking a task, nor success a necessary condition for persevering in it."

"And I," said the captain, "whose mind is cast in less firm a mould, for which I crave your indulgence, must needs have faith before beginning or prosecuting a task. Heaven has bestowed this favour on me, that my faith has never wavered; may the same be granted you!"

It seemed to Lucien, after hearing Quéré's simple and manly confession of faith, that it would be easier to face death.

"It is easier," he said, "to lay down your life, if, on the threshold of the grave, you possess the certainty that your country will conquer."

Vaissette made no reply.

"Don't you think that is so?" persisted Fabre.

"You know," answered Vaissette at length, "that I never profess certitude about anything. But the idea of death when it comes, has no terrors for me."

"You're an entertaining trio," broke in d'Aubres. "A nice time to choose for talking philosophy. You'd

think we had all had the death-sentence passed on us."

"There couldn't be a better moment for philosophising," answered Vaissette. "It is now or never. We shall soon be in the thick of things and we shan't trouble much about philosophy. When you're under fire you only think of two things: keeping clear of bullets and getting through with the job."

"And then again," said Fabre, "it used, in those old times, to be a bit of bad luck to get killed. Now the odds are all in favour of your being hit. One must be prepared for anything."

Captain de Quéré quoted the Gospel:

"For ye know not when the Master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrow or in the morning. Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch."

The three men listened to these words in silence. In the mouth of the speaker they had all the beauty of a prayer. Each had withdrawn into himself. It is only in war that a man can live these unique moments of communion with his inmost thoughts. Even the careless brain of Lieutenant d'Aubres was enveloped in a wave of deeper feeling.

"What a curious thing it is," said Fabre, musingly. "I have never heard a fine sentiment from the lips of the wounded or the dying. It is only in books that they give utterance to exalted ideas. They have no thoughts but for their own bodily suffering. But it is at times like these, on the eve of battle, that we are lifted some-

what above ourselves, we have time to think of ourselves and of those who belong to us."

He fell into a silent reverie, and the others began to dream also.

Fabre remembered the days of his boyhood, the trivial incidents of his childhood; he beheld his mother's face again.

"My mother's complexion was very fair," said he to Vaissette. "I used to be so troubled about her when I was a kiddy, that at night I used to cry at the thought that she would have to die some day. And now it's pretty certain that I shall die before her. One day——"

But he did not go on, so thickly his memories came crowding in upon him. Nevertheless his companions had been listening. They had become children again, with all a child's simplicity. They wanted to make confidants of one another. And so, leaving the heights of philosophic speculation, they fell to simple artless talk. Captain de Quéré spoke with emotion of his Breton home, its wild moorelands, its reed-fringed marshes, the melancholy croaking of frogs and toads, the eery sound of the night wind, sweeping mournfully about the walls of the ancestral manor.

"We were very poor," said Vaissette. "What shifts my people were put to to bring me up! There were no luxuries in our house. Once, on my birthday, my people hadn't even the wherewithal to buy me a present. They told me how hard it was to make the two ends meet, and how they had to look at every penny. It was a stern lesson and I had a lump in my throat.

My mother felt it more than I did and when I was in bed she came to bring me something. It was a little card case she had once received as a present, but, of which, being almost a peasant, she had never found occasion to make use. Never have I felt such delight, never have I received a finer present. Fabre, if I fall, I want you to take the card case and send it home to my mother. She will recognise it."

"It is memories and incidents of that kind," said the captain, "that build up our idea of country and of home. Reminiscences of our childhood, the place where we were brought up, the smiling face of mother, wife or sweetheart, the altars of our faith or the school of our scepticisms. Vaissette loves his country no less than I. Our love for her is the same, but our reasons differ."

"The love of one's country," answered Vaissette, "is a piece of sacred egoism,—what we love in our country is really ourselves, I mean our own memories and our own ideas. What I love France for most of all is that France was the home of the mild, yet inexorable Marat, the people's friend who, by-the-way, was born in Switzerland, and of the punctilious Maximilien Robespierre, who was the soul of the Committee of Public Safety. That, I wager, is not why Captain de Quéré loves her."

"That which is admirable in this country of ours is that we can love her for diverse reasons. For she herself is diverse. The patriotism of the Germans is a magnificent thing, let us grant them that, but they all hold a single stereotyped idea of their country's rôle,

they all profess for her the same love based on the same reasons. You, however, Vaissette, look on this war as a sacred war because our armies are fighting not only to save the country, but also for the dissemination of your ideas throughout the world. Even as those soldiers who in 1792, after Danton's decree, granted their succour and their sympathy to all those nations who aspired to regain their freedom. And you, Captain, as you survey your *chasseurs*, seem to yourself to behold the Knights of Saint Louis rising up from their long sleep. You deem that the destiny of France is to shine before men as the exemplar of the christian virtues and christian nobility and as the missioner of the ideals of Louvois and Joseph de Maistre."

The silence was still unbroken. It seemed as though earth and sky and the opposing hosts were reposing before the fearful storm which would burst upon them with the dawn of day. The officers derived much pleasure from their conversation for it made the time pass more quickly and their topics were in harmony with their feelings, with the hour, with the scene and the solemn stillness of nature.

"I look upon this war as a blessing," said de Quéré. "It was indispensable to this country of ours where indiscipline, disorder and anarchy were seen on every hand. The conduct of operations and the government of the country will demonstrate the necessity of method, discipline and authority. The Germans had learned these qualities. And thus their country, in which William II enjoyed a power no less absolute than that of our Louis XIV, played in the Europe of today a part

similar to that played by France in the seventeenth century. If its power is to endure, a state must be as rigidly ordered as the gardens of Versailles. Nothing is permanent save what is regulated. The white statues of the Acropolis and the rose flushed statues of Trianon cannot die. The king indued the yew trees of his groves and the alleys of the pleasaunces and the manners of his courtiers the same characteristic unity which nevertheless proved no hindrance to the genius of Racine or to the ardour of Villars who was the saviour of France at Denain. The Germans have accepted this restraint. They have been wonderful organisers as we ourselves were, and the Romans, whose descendants we are. Thanks to the systematic thoroughness exhibited in their universities, in their commerce and military organisations, the tide of their invasion has advanced even as far as this range of French hills from which, when day dawns, we are going to dislodge them, and if their organising powers fail to make them victorious over us, it is because they are still only Barbarians. The stone is not finely grained enough, as in the case of Rome or ourselves to rear an imperishable edifice. They have not been sufficiently moulded by the power of the idea. They did not truly understand the meaning of the word 'pietas.' "

"Like you," said Vaissette, "I feel that we are the heirs of civilisation. There is a torch that has been handed on across the ages, from the Hellas of Pericles and Plato to the Rome of the Cæsars until, thanks to the light of the Gallici Roman period and despite the darkness of the Middle Ages, it reached the palaces of

our kings. Thus the light of this torch has never been extinguished but no Germanic tribe has ever borne it, neither the Saxons nor the Franks, nor the Alamans, nor the Goths, nor the Vandals, nor the Cimbri, nor the Teutons. I am not overlooking the patient labours of Prussian scholars whose knowledge of philosophy and chemistry was unrivalled. Despite that they do not strike me as being 'honnêtes hommes,' as people used to say in the classical age. Their dreamy minds filled with the mists of their northern climes have always been attracted, like the romantic contemporaries of Goethe, towards the bright skies of the Latin countries, and in their insatiable longing for the sun, their kings, such as Alaric or Theodoric, deemed there was no happiness comparable to that of going to die in the perfumed air of Rome or Ravenna. And even in our day, these tourists, armed with their Baedekers, and wearing a Tyrolean hat adorned with a pheasant's feather are always itching to leave their counters or their beer houses to go and see the Roman Campagna, the Via Sacra and the aqueducts and to visit those regions adorned with the temples or enriched with the memories of gods and poets. But though they enumerate the stones and catalogue the ruins the soul of it all evades them.

"In those places, thought finds a visible concrete embodiment. Ideas are transformed into a creature work. And it is to safeguard this way of living our lives, to preserve our ancient humanistic civilisation and the supremacy of the ideals, that we are waging

war. Thus, albeit unconsciously, we are obeying the behest of our immemorial destiny."

"We are," said the captain, "fulfilling a sacred task."

"We are told," continued Vaissette, "that we are battling for the Right. Not a day passes but they tell us that. I admit it, I believe it, although I think that the Right is even more difficult of definition than is the Truth. It is something very abstract and very variable, a thing which those whose duty it is to apply it little prompt us to respect. Has it any existence outside the brains of philosophers, legislators and judges and does it not, like the 'Truth' of Pascal vary according to which side of the Pyrenees or which bank of the Rhine one happens to live? But I know full well that we are soldiers of the ideal. We are fighting, *mon capitaine*, because we have within us the spirit of the crusaders, and also, let me add, the spirit of the revolutionaries, and the *sans-culottes*. I do not deny that economic necessities are at the bottom of all wars, today no less than in those far-off times when the cave dwellers fought for the possession of skins of animals and hewn stones, or when the Israelites took possession of the Promised Land, and the European nations of their colonies. The realities of the physical and material world manifest themselves in these crises of the physical and material order. But the grandeur of war is proportionate to the degree in which it is a struggle for the victory of an ideal and to the degree in which the realities of the psychical and moral order are its dominant motives.

“Thus, I hold that we are striving to secure that the thinkers, the philosophers and artists shall hold a higher place in the world’s economy than army contractors and manufacturers of artillery. Doubtless we owe it to these latter that we are going to win, and not to the writers who unfold their enthusiasms in the *Bulletin des Armées*; but we also owe it to the fact that in our nation it is the thinkers who are our leaders. This intellectual supremacy is the source of all strength. Germany will be beaten because her leaders were fighting men and not, as on the morrow of Jena, men of intellect.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE

"Now we must be on the look out," said Captain de Quéré.

The men were ordered to fall in. The N. C. O's. were tearing about the place, rushing from one group to another. Some were still sleeping like logs, despite the noise and hustle, others were striking lights with flints or matches, for all the world as though they were going to light a fire and make coffee.

The wood was filled with an all pervading murmur, punctuated every now and again by the click of a bayonet or the noise of a man who had mislaid his pack or his rifle.

To the right, in a clearing, two batteries had just come up. They got into position in a few moments. The gunners began to lop down some branches to conceal the guns. The drivers led away their horses in silence. The gunners, wrapped in their dark cloaks, were calmly walking up and down.

Eight guns were drawn up in line. You could discern their outlines in the semi-darkness.

The swaying light from the lanterns that some of the men carried about with them gleamed fitfully on the polished shells stacked symmetrically in the lorries,

and lit them up like caskets of gold. There was not an unnecessary sound; not a superfluous movement. It was like the restless but purposeful activity of a hive of bees.

An impression of order and efficiency seemed to proceed from it all and brought comfort to the *chasseurs*. A few of them had gone up to talk to the gunners.

"You're going to let 'em have some to back us up, aren't you?" said Bégou.

"That's what we're here for," replied a sergeant, running his hand caressingly down the long grey cylinder.

In the tones of his voice there was a note of compassion for the infantrymen and in the voice of Bégou an accent of supplication and faith.

"What, are they short of them?" asked Bégou anxiously.

"They're not exactly short," said the gunner; "but there never are really enough."

"The dawn was breaking; a wannish light swallowing up the gloom of night, and, low down towards the east, veiled by the mist, the pale sun was visible.

Suddenly the sky was rent. As though there had been an arrangement between the adversaries, the German guns away behind the ridges and the French guns here in the forest glades sent over a shower of shrapnel as if to greet the risen day. Then silence once more; the perfect stillness of an autumn morning.

De Quéré was standing with Fabre on the outskirts of the wood. They were gazing at the enemy posi-

tions on the high ground opposite to them, now bathed in the light of dawn. Beneath, in a ravine, the first half of the battalion was awaiting the word to attack. They were joined by an artillery officer who explained that it was his duty to support their battalion in its attack.

"I can't make out how it is," said the captain, "that the Germans are not already on the top of us. Their forces have been coming on without a stop ever since they left Belgium, driving our troops before them. It seems now as if they knew we had determined to make a stand. They appear to be hesitating."

"The enemy command must have had word of our movements and intentions," said Fabre. "He is no doubt waiting for heavy reinforcements before beginning the attack."

"Our aeroplanes have already signalled their approach," said the artillery officer. But you won't be attacked without a big artillery preparation."

"You know where I'm stationed," he added as he took his departure. "Let me know if I can be of any service to you."

He had hardly said this when some German shells fell just in front of the entrance to the wood. They were not numerous enough to be dangerous but they were disquieting. An explosive shell which burst in the midst of a squad that was drawn up alongside a forest ride made a clean sweep of an elm and three wild plum trees, and killed five men outright, burying them in the huge hole it made in the ground and

sprinkling the grave with a golden shower of little ripe plums.

Captain de Quéré ran swiftly to the spot. The soil was stained with blood. He raised his eyes to heaven that was flushing with the hues of morning as though calling it to bear witness to the sacrifice of these children. He made the sign of the cross. After a few second's meditation, seeming to respond to the words of the unseen priest who absolved these martyrs, meek as in those days when, as a child, he had served the altar and wholly absorbed in the sacramental solemnity of the moment, he murmured :

"Et lux perpetua luceat eis!"

Then he hurried away to rejoin Fabre, who was watching the shells as they fell in front of him, and endeavouring to fathom his designs.

Beyond the outskirts of the wood there was an open space to be got over, a piece of ground which inclined upwards from the stream at an angle of increasing steepness. Going down it was possible to get cover. There were shrubs, two or three pathways with steep embankments, hedges, deep ditches, a few ricks of straw. But after that it was uphill as far as the village of Laumont which was the attacker's objective. It was as bare as a cliff side; not the slightest inequality in the ground, not a single clump of trees for a mile round; it was indeed a regular glacié. Down by the stream were meadows and beyond them, fields where the peasants had cut and carried the wheat.

The rising sun gilded the steeple of Laumont Church and lit up the battlefield with its level rays.

"Those of us who dine up there tonight may think themselves lucky," said Captain de Quéré.

He continued to examine, through his glasses, the German trenches on the ridge and in front of the village and all the defence-works of the enemy.

"We ought to find out whether or not they've had time to put up barbed-wire entanglements," and he proceeded to explain matters to Fabre.

"On the right is your sector, on the left, mine. You must endeavour to keep in touch with me. We've got to go forward whatever our losses may be. This time 'it's do or die.' "

"I can answer for my company," replied Fabre. "Even if there were but ten men left, those ten would get to Laumont."

"We must both try to advance with equal rapidity," resumed the captain. "We shall go in as soon as the first two companies have crossed the stream and begun to mount the glacis. We form the second wave. There's another behind, if we don't succeed."

As he said, the first two companies were waiting in open order to cross the streamlet. They were concealed at the bottom of the descent in furrows, broken ground, and behind clumps of bushes, and were invisible to the enemy. But every little while, his artillery, which seemed to have no need to economise in ammunition, dropped a few shells on their hiding place as well as onto the forest where the second division was drawn up.

The noise of battle increased. Laumont ridge, the houses in the village and the farm buildings were lit

up by swift flashes. Sometimes a shaft of sunlight shone on a window pane but most often it was the fire from the German batteries imperfectly concealed. Occasionally it was one of our shells exploding. Thousands of beams made a network of white metallic light against the rosy brightness of the dawn. They shone like search lights and dazzled the eye.

All the time a strange, deep booming sound kept dinning in their ears. It was not the noise of exploding shells, or the sound of bullets or shrapnel tearing through the air. It was a more distant sound, more ample, more dense, more compact. It made the whole atmosphere vibrate. It made one's temples throb and set one's teeth on edge. It neither increased nor diminished in intensity. It was the vast unvarying tumult of the battle.

He had regained that calmness and clearheadedness that had not deserted him during the attack on Vassinville. The first division was in fact beginning to move forward. The signaller had waved his yellow flag an instant to warn Fabre. And the *chasseurs*, having crossed the stream, were making their way up the glaxis.

"*A Dieu vat,*" said Captain de Quéré, the son of a long line of Breton sailors, in the dialect of his country.

He held out his hand to the young officer, who pressed it with emotion. Then they separated, each running to take his place at the head of his company. Lucien found his men already waiting for him. He only had time just to glance at Vaissette. They read

each other's thoughts. Emotion choked their utterance, but they smiled.

A few seconds later the fourth company emerged from the wood. The sections in skirmishing order made their way across the plateau at the double. To the left of them the third company was also going into action. At its head was de Quéré, his head erect, his tall gaunt figure sharply outlined against the light. His only weapon was a stick which he waved in wide sweeps about his head.

A rush, then another, and yet another. Soon all the open ground would have been passed. The men, urged forward by their leaders, were heedless of the danger of exposing themselves in the clear open daylight without a chance of taking cover. The blue clad figures rose up, dashed forward, head down, their *bérets* well over their eyes, flung themselves on the ground again, then, up once more for another few yard's rush. They were like the short successive waves of the flowing tide, the blue billows of the Mediterranean.

The German shells, at first few and far between, were now coming over with copious regularity. Men were killed and wounded in every section. In front, the projectiles tore their way deep into the ground, sending fragments of soil high into the air, like the spray of a water-splash. Nothing could get through so terrific a barrage.

For a whole hour the company lay stretched out in the field without budging. At first the men had taken it pretty calmly.

"There's nothing so very new about it," observed Angielli.

Now, however, they were beginning to think they were getting rather too much of a good thing. The more it went on, the more the fear of death got hold of the men. The sweat began to pour off them. The glare of the sun and the din of shell fire made them feel dazed. The horrible suspense caused them to gasp and pant. Some of the wounded were crying out in their agony.

"This isn't war, it's butchery," said Rousset.

"Shut up, fool," said Corporal Gros.

"I tell you it's butchery," repeated Rousset doggedly.

So near were the Germans on the ridge opposite that you could hear the grinding of their machine guns spitting away their bullets on the first division.

"Putrid coffee that mill grinds," said Angielli, with a wink at the corporal, the sergeant and all the N. C. O's. He fancied it was up to him to take the men's minds off the thing a bit.

However, his jokes fell very flat. The men lay in the grass as motionless as lizards. Servajac began to munch bits of dry grass. A shell splinter had just hit Diribarne on the head nearly severing it from the body. The blood bubbled out, bathing his face and soaking into his clothes.

"It's butchery," said Rousset again.

"Shut up, will you," cried Gros, "or I'll clump your head." Adding, "The best men always get done in and leave the funks and the grouzers behind! Good God, just look at the lieutenant." Fabre was standing

bolt upright, impassive and imperturbable beneath the avalanche of shrapnel, shell splinters and bullets. He was scrutinising through his field glasses the position occupied by the enemy, and consulting his map.

The displacement of air caused by the shells made his hat fly off. He ran after it and picked it up just as he might have done if the wind had blown it off in the street. Banging it against his knee to knock out the dust, he put it on his head again. He saw de Quéré, who had also been pulled up by the violence of the firing, and waved him a friendly greeting.

A dozen German field guns were stationed about half a mile away. Not much farther off was a battery of heavy artillery, no better concealed. You could see the quick, white flashes that followed each explosion. Twice during the last hour, Fabre had signalled their position to our artillery in the woods; but all in vain. Now for the third time the Commandant made answer that his information was not sufficiently precise to enable him to locate the target. Whereupon Fabre got up, ascertained the exact position on his staff map, drew a rough sketch and called his orderly.

"Take that to the gunners," he said.

The man began to crawl along; then, in order to move the quicker he got on his feet and made for the forest. A shell burst just a few yards above his head. The bullets and shell splinters spread out just like an umbrella. The orderly stopped short, glued to the spot. The torrent descended and he disappeared to view in the white cloud of the explosion. The smoke cleared away. There was the man standing bolt up-

right, without a scratch, without a bruise, wondering how it was he was alive. He laughed, spread out the palm of his hand with a gesture of extraordinary naïveté, as one does in order to find out whether it has stopped raining. Having satisfied himself that it was all over he stepped forth again.

Half an hour went by; it seemed like ten centuries. The enemy went on shelling. The orderly came back with a brief message scribbled off by the officer in charge of the guns. "I was obliged," he said, "to have the exact spot. We are short of ammunition and I haven't enough shells to play on an objective that is not clearly defined."

"Ah, well!" commented Fabre. "The lives of the infantry make up for the shortage of ammunition. Men's lives are cheap."

He was furious. The staff had blundered again. What were they thinking about to send these companies to attack a position without proper artillery preparations? Again he stood up and surveyed his men, lying prostrate on the ground like Moslems at prayer.

"Never mind," he exclaimed, "we shall win." A liaison officer brought him a note from Vaissette.

"Why are we waiting?" asked the latter, adding in a sort of humorous vein: "I am reflecting while this bombardment is going on that Stendhal's Fabrice was present at the battle of Waterloo without being aware of it. I assure you that for the moment, I feel doubtful whether we are really taking part in a battle that is going to count for much in history." By way of

post-script he scribbled at the end: "If we don't meet again, remember my pocket-case."

But Lucien's brow cleared. Our batteries had opened fire. A few puffs of smoke had just gathered above Laumont and had merrily vanished into air. They were getting the range. Soon afterwards round began to follow round with wild rapidity. You could hear the shells shrieking overhead. They would burst on the German guns and without an interval, another round tore through the air. The houses in the village were knocked to atoms, splinters of steel and wood were flying about in the air. Our shells searched out the enemy positions like a reaping hook among the wheat. The Prussian batteries were swiftly silenced.

"Good old seventy-fives," murmured Lucien.

He stood up and taking advantage of the lull got his company on their feet and hurried them forward towards the ravines which descended in the direction of the river, taking them over the open ground at the double. They were soon able to avail themselves of the cover provided by the broken ground, and by plantations of young pear trees. For a few moments they were safe, but it was impossible to remain for any length of time in the ravine. The foremost storming companies were creeping up over the open ground on the other side under continuous rifle fire from the enemy. To the left de Quéré was pushing on. To the right troops began to pour from the wood, others from a village. Farther along still some Zouaves were deploying from a piece of rising ground. The whole

formed a continuous chain of battalions linked together in a compact mass.

The men were suffocating. The sun was broiling them and they were running with sweat. They still had the noise of the shells, the horrible memory of the preceding hour, dinning in their ears. They knew that all this was only a prelude. Several had grown pale. Servajac maintained a savage silence. He was thinking of his comrade Diribarne who had had his head blown off just beside him. They felt as though the death sentence had been passed on them. Nevertheless some immense, inscrutable force seemed to have got possession of them and to be driving them to action. No one thought about saving his skin. They were the sport of circumstance and jesting. They were obeying the call of the soil.

"It's murder, simple murder!" Rousset kept repeating mechanically.

"Yes, it's murder," answered Angielli, "because it's war," and under his breath he hummed the *Ça ira!*

They looked at the troops entering the zone of fire. Several went down, their red breeches scattered about over field and furrow like the flowers of summer.

Soon it would be their turn to plunge into the furnace. They looked at the ground in front of them. A little water to get across, a river bed almost dry, and they too would be in that hell upon earth. A line of *tirailleurs* lay stretched out a few yards in front. Their alignment was perfect. They looked as though they were taking part in a field day. But they never stirred. The same machine gun had laid out and

stiffened them all. And they had to be passed over. After that came the space, the immense space, the terrible limitless space of the field of battle. A few scattered corpses, unrecognizable, tumbled about with clods of earth or lumps of grass, and after that nothing. Just space, empty space. It was that space that had to be got over somehow, all that interminable open ground, right up to the enemy's lines.

The leaders of the four sections had taken their places at the head of their men, now scattered in skirmishing order. Suddenly Lucien Fabre jumped the stream and covered the piece of level ground at the run. That set things going. The whole company came on after like a machine. The air was vibrant with bullets. It seemed as though the wind was whistling. As a matter of fact there wasn't a breath. Some of the men came down with a crash. The rest, with a dazed, drunken expression in their eyes, watched the sergeant's signals. That rush was over; they lay down.

Up again! There was another twenty yards to do. Corporal Bégou, with a bullet through his throat, was sitting up, beating the air with his arms. More bullets came and pierced his lungs. At the third bound, Rousset came down all of a heap. A shell had scalped him, scattering his skull and brains. Even when you lay flat down, the bullets ricocheted, covering you with earth and stones. They struck the men's water bottles with a short metallic sound. Some were riddled like colanders.

Meanwhile the guns on both sides were firing un-

ceasingly, creating the most hellish uproar. The earth seemed to tremble. The heavens groaned and the air was aflame. Vaissette was standing up endeavoring to make out Fabre's signals. He was trying to keep in touch with his N. C. O's. and to the left, with one of Captain de Quéré's sections. At present this could no longer be done. His brain was on fire. He felt as if his reason were going. He only saw one thing clearly and he kept saying it over and over again to himself.

"It's too long. . . ." "It's too long. . . ."

He had but one longing, one passionate and imperious longing, and that was to get at the enemy at all costs. He felt a rage in his heart against his men, who would not come along.

Lucien Fabre, too, felt as if he were going mad, but he still managed to keep his presence of mind. They must get along more quickly. If they didn't not a man would ever reach the Prussian defences. Behind him he saw other echelons, other waves of men coming on behind his company. They were now too close up to the enemy to come along slowly. It was offering too easy a target.

"We must get it over," said Lucien.

He glanced behind him. There was a bugler, his orderly and a corporal. He sent the three of them to tell the section commanders to liven up the rushes. He went himself to explain his orders to Vaissette.

"Twenty yards at a time. Twenty yards every minute. In a quarter of an hour we shall be close enough up to charge."

"Attention! Now for a rush as far as the turnip fields!" shouted Vaisette. "Forward!"

The section rose up as though hypnotised, swaggered forward and spread out over the field.

"Now then, twenty more yards. Forward!" A wounded man was yelling with pain. Another was working the earth about with his feet.

"Attention. . . . Now for the ploughed ground," cried Vaisette. "Forward!"

The men obeyed, crouching and running forward, head down.

"Duck and run as hard as you can for God's sake. Close up the ranks. Come on, come on, close after me," thundered Vaisette amid shot and shell.

"Stick it a bit longer and you will be through with it . . . Look out! Now for a rush over the rest of the ploughed land . . . Forward!"

He covered the space indicated, but he covered it alone. His section had not followed.

This was more than he could stand. Heedless of the peril, standing bolt upright amid the tempest, he raged like a man possessed as he returned to his section.

"Are you coming on, you dirty swine?" he raved.

The terror-stricken *chasseurs* never budged.

"I'll teach you to hug the ground, you blackguards," Vaisette went on as he kicked a prone figure that remained motionless. Vaisette who was as blind as a bat bent over him. It was a corpse.

"Ah!" said he, "he's dead, the fool!"

"If you don't go on, I'll down you with my revolver."

The threat was ludicrous, seeing the torrent of fire that was bellowing over their heads.

"Forward!" he shouted.

"Vive la Sociale," sang out Angielli, rising up and rushing after Vaissette. The whole section got in motion with a yell, and rushed another hundred yards.

"We're there!" cried the subaltern.

He glowed with triumph. A slight rise in the ground afforded some cover to the men.

"Close up on the centre there!" he said. "Fix bayonets. Pick up your dressing. My God! I thought we should never do it. Ah, I bet there are still some laggards."

He was about to stand up; but he felt someone tugging at his tunic. It was Angielli.

"Don't move for God's sake," said the man from Marseilles, "or you'll get done in."

He glued his face to the earth. All power of thought forsook him. He no longer knew where he was. He only knew that he must not make the slightest movement.

Suddenly a thrill passed through his whole frame. He raised himself on his hands and listened. Over there, away to the left, he caught the notes of a bugle. They seemed to come from de Quéré's sections. But no it was only the rhythm of the shells, the rifle-fire, the "wakka-wakka" of the machine guns. It must have been an hallucination.

Ah, no, this time, sure enough, it was the sound of

the bugle. Though still far off, it pierced the uproar of the battle. All the men had caught the notes and were straining their ears, breathless. It was winged music. Imperiously it sounded the note of victory. It was the *Marseillaise*!

A thrill went through the troops. In the distance the last notes of the national hymn were dying away. Soon they began to sound again nearer at hand. Vaissette rose up like a man transported. He was drunk with glory. The sunlight was a golden splendour. Suddenly there was a sound of music behind him. Turning round he beheld Marsanne, the bugler. Unbidden he had got on his feet and standing bolt upright amid the storm of bullets, his cheeks puffed out and crimson to the exertion, the sweat dropping off him, he too was putting all the strength of his lungs, and all his heart and soul, into the *Marseillaise*.

"Keep close behind me!" shouted Vaissette. "Get ready to charge!"

The men were all on their feet. Many, too, were shouting: "Get ready to charge!"

Right and left, on all sides, from other battalions far away, or from sections close at hand, the strains of the deathless melody mingled together and floated far and wide as bugle answered bugle.

"Forward . . . Fix bayonets . . . Charge!"

Vaissette rushed at the foe, his men close at his heels. They issued from every furrow, from every mound of earth, from every hollow. Close behind them red *képis* were also thronging forward over ploughed land and wheat fields. It was as though the plain, with

its flowers, red and blue, were on the march. The mighty human billow was breaking triumphant over the German lines.

CHAPTER IX

THE BATTLE CONTINUES

THE German machine guns are rattling away like an engine. Their bullets buzz through the air like a swarm of stones from slings. Volleys of rifle-fire come in quick succession, round after round. Vaissette can see nothing but a wheel, the wheel of the lottery at the fair, whirling round in a dazzling blaze of light. This impression lasts the space of a second.

Somewhere in the rear, a bugle is still calling. It is now sounding the charge. The ringing note abruptly dies away in an agonised wail; the bugler has had his quietus. Forward still, you can see the blinding flash leaping from the muzzles of the German rifles. They are just there, a few yards off. In a moment we shall grasp them in our hands. The earth seems to give way under foot and the wheel draws you into its vortex.

The subaltern has just fallen flat on his face a few yards from the trench. The pain of the fall brings him to his senses, and he is himself again.

"I'm not wounded, after all," he reflects.

He is not wounded; he does not understand why he is on the ground. He has lost his spectacles, and without them is like a shipwrecked mariner struggling in the sea. But he cannot move his feet; some one must be holding them. The cause of his fall is a very

low wire entanglement running along the ground. And the whole surging tide of flesh and blood is broken by this frail invisible rampart. Overhead, too, there is a net of steel formed by the crossing fire of the bullets. In the intervals between the volleys can be heard the command of the Prussian officers. *Chasseurs* reach the entanglement only to trip and fall. The heap of bodies beside the officer is growing.

All the men fall, stopped by the wire, stopped by the bullets. They topple over and strew the ground like the leaves of a tree stripped by an autumn wind. Vaissette cannot rise; it is simply impossible. The fire overhead is developing a curtain of lead, too heavy, too hard to break through.

The impetus of the platoon is broken. Lucien Fabre, from his position, has been following the advance of his company; it is essential that the whole unit should advance simultaneously and that the wave should assault the German trench on a continuous front.

All the groups swarming up the slope rise, fall, and rush forward with a stirring rhythm. The storm of lead cannot stop the scouts who are in advance. The officer lives the drama of each rush with the soldier who performs it, as though *his* resolve, *his* enthusiasm would support him. There he stands, exposing himself to the avalanche, now motionless, now leaning forward, straining every muscle, as if by the output of physical energy he could lend speed to the impulse of his sections.

The gesture of his arm deploys them, extends them, urges them forward into the storm. He thinks of

himself as a sower casting his seed into the wind among the furrows.

Not a single group hesitates or slackens. Vaissette, on the extreme left has made more progress, but on the right one section is dropping behind in the advance to death.

"Are you there, Girard?" asks Lucien.

"All right, sir; all right," answers the runner calmly. He comes of that imperturbable breed in whom courage is so much a matter of instinct that it almost ceases to be a virtue.

"Crawl to Sergeant Batisti; his men are falling asleep between their rushes. Tell him to take them on and pay no attention to anything but my signals and his objective. Go as fast as you can. Take care of yourself. The order must get through."

And Lucien turns again to watch the dogged advance of his *chasseurs*. Yard by yard they advance in succession, covering stubble and ploughed land. Their backs rise and fall like the swell of the waves at sea. At this moment the band strikes up. *Marseillaise* answers to *Marseillaise*; the music swells, grows fainter, re-echoes, and is drowned in the crash of the bullets, the howl of the passing shells, the detonations, the loud roar of the charging line.

Fabre can reason no longer. He too has been carried away by the delirium of the moment. In his own heart he feels the emotion of the whole company, which rushes forward as though inspired. *He* is the soul of that living tide. By leaps and bounds he advances, yelling: "Forward!—Forward!—Forward!"

Was it not *he* who let slip the human pack that is now panting behind him?

“Forward!”

Excitement has lent him wings. The ground is paved with bronze and iron, so thickly have the shells fallen. The high explosives plough into the earth and columns of stones leap into the air all round, like the Icelandic geysers which spring up under your feet.

“Forward!” roars Fabre. And suddenly he is thrown down on the grass. The trip-wire holds him fast. A few men jump the wire and pass him; they advance a few paces, are entangled, stagger and remain lying full length. He rises once more to shout to his men. In a second, the whole face of the earth has changed. Not a man is to be seen. The whole plain is empty. A moment ago it was a swarm of uniforms moving in waves under the downpouring steel and sunlight. And in a trice it has become a lifeless desert. Companies and battalions are dying on the wire. Lucien’s frame is convulsed by one big sob. He roars his rage into the crackling rifles. In a flash he sees the field vainly strewn with dead—his dead. Suddenly he falls like a log, murmuring: “It is nothing;—it is nothing.”

He has been felled by a terrific blow. He does not know where, but his arm is streaming. “It is nothing,—it is nothing,” he repeats.

Girard is at his side. Where has he come from? The whole thing is incomprehensible. His head swims; the sun seems to be hiding.

Girard's voice says: "I am here, *mon lieutenant*; I am here. If you move we are done for."

Fabre replies: "I think I am wounded."

The orderly curses and swears like a heathen, but before he can move, Lucien repeats: "Keep still. It's nothing. It's in the arm."

"Don't move; it's too hot just now. I'll dress it for you in a minute."

Neither speaks for a while. The fire is decreasing and the raucous commands of the Prussian officers grate on their ears.

Then, "Girard!" calls the officer.

"Sir?"

"Raise yourself on your hands. Take a look at the company."

Softly, slowly, Girard raises himself. A bullet whistles past. He flattens himself again.

"I can't see them. They are all lying flat or killed. One or two are retiring towards the valley."

Fabre is in despair.

Another long silence; then he calls again:

"Girard!"

"Sir?"

"So—so France is done for!"

Then he lies still—speechless. No physical pain now, no mental anguish. He is sure that death is close at hand, and he is waiting for it. The rifle-fire has ceased; only the shells shriek past. The air is rent by the cries of agony of a whole race of soldiers in pain. The two assaulting waves, lying in the web of steel, breathe aloud their lamentations. The companies are

scattered over the ground like a bloody harvest new-mown. The whole plain groans.

"Girard," says Fabre, "we must get away from here. Those swine have only to get out of their trenches to take us."

It is no easy task; they have to crawl as far as the valley. Down the furrows they glide, dragging themselves along the ground. Girard is a master of the art. He never stops to breathe, moving like a reptile, and pulling along, yard by yard, his officer, who is still bleeding and in the grip of fever. A few minutes after starting they meet Servajac, who is also on his way back to the jumping-off line. He has stayed behind to bandage his comrades, dashing from man to man, giving them water, dressing their wounds, and sighing when he finds himself bending over a corpse.

"Lieutenant Vaissette has managed to get back to our lines," said Servajac; "he is not wounded."

"Supposing we hauled the officer along——" said Girard.

"Yes, there is a chance of getting through."

And on they go, harnessed to their burden. There are only a hundred yards left to cover, and they are now at a good distance from the enemy, who has even given up firing at isolated fugitives. Fabre and the two men rise and run till they reach the steep banks of the brook.

Almost before Lucien arrived, Vaissette was rushing towards him and they embraced.

"Is it serious?" asked the subaltern, pointing to the arm which had stained the tunic red.

"I hope not," said Lucien.

"I have not been touched," Vaissette proceeded. He did not like the thought of having come unscathed out of that inferno, and felt compelled to justify himself.

"All the same," said he, "I stayed at the head of my platoon till the last. Captain de Quéré is not wounded, either. D'Aubres is killed."

De Quéré arrived as he spoke. Vaissette and the orderly had cut open the lieutenant's tunic and shirt. The skin was bruised and discoloured and the wound still bleeding. The captain ordered him to go to the aid-post, and sent Girard with him.

"We shall come and see you later on. Meanwhile we must organise our defences here."

Lucien submitted without demur. His head swam. He had only a vague idea of what was said to him, and of what was happening around him. He went off slowly, supported by his orderly. His men, as they watched him go, were on the verge of tears. Vaissette came near to breaking down.

"Now to work, Vaissette!" said de Quéré. "It's no time to be thinking of the killed and wounded. We have this battle to win."

Vaissette looked at the captain, wondering whether he had gone mad.

"Win?" he stammered.

"Why, you don't suppose the battle is over?" declared de Quéré. "We are still alive, I fancy. That is no reflection on your courage, merely a reminder of *our* duty."

But Vaissette could not believe his senses. He was

stupified and could find no answer. What? The company decimated, the cries of the dying still in their ears, the attack held up, whole battalions mown down, his friend wounded, all the horror of that day of hell; was all that not enough? But the captain continued:

"There is no time to lose. You remain in command of No. 4 Company. It's mighty good luck for us that the Prussians didn't try a counter-attack; they would have swept us off the face of the earth. Re-form your platoons as well as you can. The sun is still high; it is hardly four o'clock; perhaps we shall attack again. Now I must go and get my own units re-organised."

And de Quéré quietly walked away.

"Another attack!" mused Vaissette. The idea was impossible and brutal. In his inmost heart, he found it a little revolting.

"You cannot demand from the soul," he thought, "an effort out of proportion to its moral strength." But on reflection, he conceded, "At the same time, I have learned to-day that there is nothing you cannot obtain from the human being."

He collected the *chasseurs* who were one by one re-joining what was left of the company. Sergeant Batisti was trying to put life into the dazed men. Pluchard, in high excitement, was delivering a commentary on every phase of the attack, and prophesying an enemy offensive. There were altogether about forty soldiers left.

"Don't leave them idle," said Vaissette to the sergeant; "make them use their grubbers. Two sentries

will be enough. The rest can dig a trench. It is wiser, and it is the only way to keep them in hand."

The heat was oppressive; clouds were slowly gathering. The guns on either side continued to thunder. With their short spades and their shovels, the men set to work, and so began to shake off their dejection. They began to live once more and were conscious that they were hungry.

"It's easy enough to die," said Angielli, "but it's hard luck to have nothing to eat."

"What about the fellows out there?" asked Corporal Gros, "are *they* eating?"

"It's a pity you are so thick-headed," said Angielli; "I only said that for a joke, and you go and talk about the dead. Leave them alone and wait for your turn."

A runner brought an order from the Major to hold on to the ground and repulse any attack at all costs; later on they would take the initiative and assault again. "De Quéré was right," thought Vaissette. He went over to the captain, who was also organising his position, and had just returned from Battalion Headquarters.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" asked de Quéré. "I have just been complaining to the Major. We are not to attack till our artillery has prepared the ground by destroying their wire. That will be to-morrow, at dawn, I suppose. Have you any bread?"

Vaissette had none. But he had a tin of sardines left in his haversack and de Quéré had some chocolate.

Night was falling. They dined on oily fish, sweet chocolate and no bread.

"I don't like the darkness," declared the lieutenant; "I am going back to my men."

"I hope you will have a good night," replied the captain. "To-morrow is the great day, and I thank God for keeping me alive to see it."

Vaissette was in no humor for conversation. It was not hope that he felt stirring within him, but the will to fight to the death, a proud sublimity of conscience that made him thirst for the supreme sacrifice.

The *chasseurs* had not done a great deal of work; they had made very little impression on the ground.

"We are not a nation of navvies," Vaissette reflected.

He thought of the Roman camps and the trenches dug nightly by the legionaries, and made a mental comparison, not without smiling, between the battles of his own company and those of Cæsar's cohorts.

The darkness was now impenetrable. The *chasseurs* were exhausted; their eyes, some dull, some fevered, told their tale of glory and misery. They did not talk; the impression of their failure was still upon them. Darkness filled them with depression. Vaissette resolved to talk to them, to draw them out of themselves, to make them feel his affection. He was proud to command the mangled remnants of the company that had entered the campaign under Captain Nicolaï.

"You are not looking very cheerful," said he to Angielli.

The *chasseur* replied only by a gesture of utter weariness.

Gros explained, "We are not down-hearted, sir; but we are pretty hungry."

Hungry they were, and that was the only cause of their depression. Not that they were unconscious of the gaps in their ranks; Servajac had lost the silent fellowship of Diribarne; Bégou and Rousset and so many more were no longer among them, but that was all in the day's work. They were there to die and to see the others die. Presently, they, themselves would be in action again; there would be another casualty list, another slaughter; and that, too, they could bear. They would go to meet their fate without a murmur in their hearts, without a question, with complete resignation. All these dejected men, with the same gaps in their ranks and the same danger in prospect, would have been cheerful and full of high spirits if only the rations could have come up, if only they had been successful in their attack. But they had failed and they were hungry.

An inward light broke upon Vaissette; he was beginning to understand the reasons for his own devotion and the self-sacrifice of his men.

They had all lost their individuality; they were but cells of the organism that is France. They were not men at all, but part of the soil of France, like the beeches in that forest or the water running along the valley. The whole land of France, her copses and fields, her forests and cities, wanted to live, and her sons were defending her. They gave obedience not so

much to the appeal of conscience, or the arguments of love and reason, as to the voice of the patch of earth and sky, which had been their cradle and would one day be their grave. They were just a part of France, like the soil and the harvests. The rivers flow on and on, like the history of a nation, the trees put forth fresh leaves with each returning spring; generation after generation takes up the duty of being the sacred guardians of their native soil.

The sons of France pass away and those who die for her realise neither the necessity nor the fruits of their sacrifice; nor do they feel the beauty of it. They expect no reward in another world, where there is no distinction of country; they are unconscious of their rôle and its greatness. They do not feel the glory and hardship of being the pride and safeguard of France any more than the Ile-de-France feels the glory of her wonderful twilight or than the Gallo-Roman Alps and Rhine feel the hardship of marking her eastern boundaries.

The wind had risen and was driving the clouds across the sky in a magnificent cavalcade. As they passed they veiled the moon, and cast mysterious moving shadows on the open ground. The bushes became living things; enemies were advancing in the darkness.

Their line could be distinguished; rifle-shots kept going off and dying away in the silence. Now and again a gust of wind passed over, shaking the trees and whistling through the undergrowth; the dead

leaves in the air proclaimed the advent of autumn. The rustling of their fall was like the creak of flesh pierced by a bayonet. Wrapped up in their capes, motionless and numb, the *chasseurs* looked like ghosts. The horror of the night dilated their eyes.

The most appalling thing was the sobs of the wounded. When you have heard these long wailing appeals, the child-like cries of pain, the stifled groans and sharp yells of agony, you seem to have reached the very limits of anguish and pain.

Captain de Quéré went to see Vaissette. "They are not attacking," said he; "and it is just as well. But we are going to assault again. I have just had these orders."

He explained them. It was simple. Before dawn the artillery was to bombard the enemy trenches and the approaches to them, which had been reconnoitred the day before at such a cost. At the same time the infantry would advance and try to secure a footing in Laumont.

"In a few moments," continued de Quéré, "the remainder of the battalion is coming up to reinforce us. We two shall then form one company."

"A little while ago," Vaissette confessed, "I was so sorry for these men, that I thought it barbarous to throw them into the furnace again; but I have come to feel that it must be, that they are here for that very purpose, as the instruments of the will of the nation."

"They do not measure the whole extent of their greatness," said de Quéré; "they have no conception of the magnitude of their sacrifice."

"The terrible thing," replied Vaissette, "is, after the danger is past, to expose yourself to a new danger,—to begin all over again being a martyr and hero,—and to keep on repeating the same act of resignation. War is not only an ordeal, but a long one."

"And here," said the captain with emphasis, "you see what an infinite source of consolation the Christian philosophy is. I do not deny that other systems have their own nobility and beauty; but they are not made for our human nature. I don't wish to start a wrangle on religion; but you will agree that in these times of stress the Fates break us and bow our necks. It is at such times that it is good to have in our own hearts the faith that enables us to climb the path of Calvary and the doctrine which has given us the habit of resignation."

"I do not deny," replied Vaissette, "that Christianity has been an inexhaustible source of comfort and hope in the darkest days of the world's history; nor do I deny the powers of consolation that it now lends to certain souls. But I do wish to point out that I find in the maxims of the pagan philosophers, for myself if not for you, the same support in adversity. You know those fine lines of Horace, which the Chancellor of the Hospital took for his motto:

*Si fractus illabatur orbis,
Impavidum ferient ruinæ.*

They were in harmony with his stoical soul and the woes of his age, though that was less prolific of misery than our own. Before my eyes too the world might crumble; I should not tremble at its fall."

"You know well, my dear friend," said the captain, "that Horace, like Virgil and all the great pagans of antiquity, had unconsciously breathed the mysterious perfume of the Gospel, which even before the birth of Christ was floating in the air. If death seems to me so easy it is because I know that the reward is in store for me: Eternity is there."

The wind had dropped and a thin rain fell silently from the clouds. Not a shot; not a cry from the dying. Never had the silence been so absolute. De Quéré inhaled the night air and said:

"I will make a confession. Until now I have confused my love for France with my worship of God. My patriotism and my faith were mingled in the enthusiasm of action. This war was a crusade. Now it is not quite the same thing. A few weeks of campaigning and yesterday's tragedy of a few hours have made me clearer. I *do* believe in God and I *do* love my country; but these two passions have become separate things.

"My religion, as I told you, makes sacrifice and resignation easier; but it no longer supplies me with an impulse to sacrifice and resignation. It is a consolation and not a motive for action. It is my country, and nothing else, that urges me to fight and to expose myself to death. If I die, I die a good Christian; but I shall not have died for Christianity; I shall have died for my country."

"It amazes me to hear you say that," said Vaissette. "I have dreamed of a world here on earth, as you have dreamed of one in heaven,—a world in which frontiers

would be abolished. I hope the sun will one day shine upon generations who know nothing of war. I too have a religion—that of humanity; and I made my love of France part of that religion. I thought that was the reason for the thrill that I felt in the first hours of danger, and for the tender affection I have felt for this soil ever since. Well, I was wrong. That was not the reason. My patriotism has neither rational foundations nor logical bases. I am obeying an instinct. That is what turns our humble *chasseurs* into heroes unknown to fame. They are not aware of it; we have just discovered it for ourselves; the power of the soil has become flesh in us.”

“That explains,” said de Quéré, “the passive fatalism with which our men meet death. They go to it like a great obedient herd of cattle, without a murmur. The martyrs themselves, who of their own unfettered choice elected to die and were fortified by divine aid, were not braver than our soldiers; yet the latter have not come to the sacrifice of their own free will, as the saints did, nor do they expect after their sufferings the immediate compensation of Paradise.”

“They expect no reward whatever. They do not discount their glory; that is a word which has no meaning save for those delightful lads of twenty; it means nothing to a man who will soon be one of those nameless corpses piled up to ensure our victory. *They* cannot feel that they are defending their distant hearths, their ancestral fields, the homes of their wives. They are not fighting for a noble and glorious past whose history is utterly unknown to them. They form

a rampart with their breasts to protect a pack of cowards hiding in the depots, bourgeois lavish of words but not of sacrifices, and more ready to offer their sons' blood than their own gold, which can also save France; and it is puerile to suppose that this docile mass of humanity gives itself up to be slaughtered because it is forced by some moral discipline of conscience to do its duty."

"You are right," murmured the captain; "we are only obeying an invincible will which is imposed upon us—a will which has its origin deep down in the soil in which we are rooted. We are its instrument."

"*Mon capitaine*," said the subaltern gravely, "the other day we were wrong. We said we loved France in the same way, but for different reasons. Beyond doubt our love is one and the same, but it is so not only in its methods and aims, but also in its source; we both thrill to the call of France."

"Why, my dear fellow," interrupted the captain, "you are proposing to reconcile the shades of Voltaire and the Man of Sorrows."

"Yes, yes," Vaissette continued eagerly; "you can't prevent me from fighting, when she wills it, for France, the whole of France,—the France of the past, whose errors and weaknesses I don't deny, and the France of the future for which we are laying the foundations. And it is my glory that you are fighting for the same France; far apart as we are and shall be, it is for one and the same ideal that your blood and mine will stain this fair soil of France."

For a long time the officers were silent, immersed in their thoughts.

The rain had ceased, the intense darkness of the night, and the colder breath of the air heralded the approach of dawn. The sound of cautious footsteps came down from the wood. It was the other companies of the 36th coming to take up their positions for the attack. Vaissette closed in his men upon those of Captain de Quéré. The machine gun section came up beside them. The battalion commander called for the officers; the attack was to be in an hour's time; no manœuvring was necessary; each company commander was to advance straight on his objective, the German trench. Three star-shells went up from the village, rose high in air and burst. The men watched their yellow track as they rose, and saw the whole field illuminated by their light. The enemy intended to make sure that the slopes were unoccupied.

As though they had been waiting for this signal, our batteries came into action; the bloody work of the day had begun anew.

"War seems to mean fighting all the time," declared Pluchard.

"And what of it?" said Angielli. "We aren't here for fun," and added, after a moment's reflection, "It's a serious business."

"Yes, it's a serious business," echoed Servajac.

"All the same," insisted Pluchard, "I didn't think we should fight so often."

And that was the impression of all the men. They had learned in the last month that war was a thing of

pain and sadness; they had yet to learn how long and wearying it was. Their brains, fortunately for them, could not grasp the idea of infinity, of duration. They had no conception of the time they would yet have to live under arms, the long chain of days of servitude, each bringing its own hardships and its own quota of danger. But they felt the strain of the frequent attacks and repeated assaults with their attendant perils. There was neither complaint nor revolt, just an unutterable weariness of body and soul.

"This time our gunners are making things easier for us," said Corporal Gros.

And in fact, at regular intervals of a minute or so, a flight of shells would pass overhead and burst on the enemy trenches opposite. The explosion would light up the hole made by the shell, like the crater of a volcano, from which then flew a shower of stones, earth and red-hot metal.

They had not time to gaze on the spectacle for long, —the order to advance had just arrived. Vaissette rushed forward up the hillside, followed by the remnants of his company.

But they could not cover much ground in this way. The manœuvre had been betrayed by the light of starshells and the Germans were searching all the ground with their fire. Once more they were compelled to lie down in the field and continue their advance by short rushes.

It was tragic. The *chasseurs* were going over the same ground that they had covered the day before, in advance and in retreat. You would recognise here a

clod that had served as cover, there a shell-hole in which you had hidden. You passed the same mangolds and the same furrows. Now and again you would come upon a wounded man who had been in his death-agony since the morning before, or the mangled corpse of a comrade.

They found Rousset's body with the skull open, and the face red with dried blood and beyond recognition. Angielli had to step over a corpse; he recognised Bégou. Meanwhile the shells poured down; the whole air quivered; it was like being surrounded by cracking walls.

Vaissette and de Quéré had decided not to lie down between the rushes. This was the only way to prevent straggling. They ran sometimes at the head of the line of scouts, sometimes behind it. They were once more full of confidence; under fire a man recovers all his equilibrium. A bugle in the valley had just warned them that the second wave was coming into action on the open ground. They felt they had a solid mass behind them, on which they could lean, so as not to bend.

As they advanced, the men felt more assured. A kind of exasperation was taking possession of them, a desire to have done with it, to avenge yesterday's failure, to come to grips with the Pickelhauben and grey coats. They began to thrill with the desire to conquer; Vaissette's gallantry was infecting all his subordinates. Now they were getting near the wire. At the officer's word of command they got up, lay down, advanced under the protection of heavy bursts of artillery fire.

Sergeant Batiste, with a handful of men, had covered a hundred yards at a single rush. Pluchard had fallen like a log with his belly cut open by a shell-splinter. But the valiant little group had got close to the trenches in which our shells were falling. They had thrown themselves down on the ground to wait for their comrades. By the light of the explosions and star-shells their uniforms could be seen stretched out side by side.

The sight inspired the whole company with the spirit of heroism; Angielli in turn rushed forward, carrying with him another group. Vaissette was yelling: "Forward! Forward!" He waved both arms in a wild gesture which had a grotesque effect in the weird lights of the battlefield. A red streak in the East heralded the dawn. The whole company, fired by the impulse, rushed on like a whirlwind.

They had reached the wire but could go no further. Our shells were still falling thick and fast. They lay flat on the ground which was shaken as by an earthquake, and then they had to pause a while. The darkness was growing less intense.

Vaissette raised his head and shoulders and shouted, so as to be heard by those around him:

"You will avenge Lieutenant Fabre and Captain Nicolai. Pass it along."

The men repeated the message as if it had been an order.

"I am here!" shouted Girard.

It was Lucien's orderly. No one knew how he came to be with the company, but there he was, at his post.

Now you could see the men nearest to you, and soon

the darkness seemed to have gone, and nothing was left but mist. The day was breaking.

"It is the dawn," said de Quéré in a tone of mystical significance.

Abruptly the bombardment ceased. Down in the valley a hunting call was sounding. It was the signal.

Vaissette leaped up, livid and drunk with excitement. The bullets whistled round him. The German machine guns came into action. The whole company was on its feet galloping over the shell-torn soil, trampling under foot the broken wire. Right and left of them, the companies had surged forward as one man. The whole line, bayonet at the point, was dashing forward. Behind it the second wave was charging up the slope with a roar. Above the din rang out the voice of Vaissette:

"Vive la France!"

And No. 4 Company swept over the German trench.

The sun had suddenly burst through the mist—glorious and red, as he must have shone at Austerlitz and the Moskova.

The village of Laumont was in flames. The men were walking over corpses. From the hill-top Captain de Quéré, looking through his range-finder, watched the broken Prussian battalions cross the river in disorder—retiring toward the North. There was now scarcely a sound to be heard. A single battery had just moved forward into position and was harassing the fugitives. At a great height, a French aeroplane glistened in the sunlight. The captain's head was

bandaged, for he had a slight wound. He replaced his glasses in their case and leaned towards Vaissette, who was sitting beside him on what had once been an orchard wall. He looked up into the great light of the sky. "Thank you," he said, quite simply, and rested his hand affectionately on his subaltern's shoulder.

Vaissette's whole frame was shaken with convulsive sobs.

CHAPTER X

THE FIELD AMBULANCE

VAISSETTE'S one fear, on arriving at Buzanthesis, was that Lucien might have been already evacuated. But as he entered the village, he met the officer in charge of the Battalion details, who reassured him on this point. Fabre was in an ambulance on the village square; he had just seen him.

Vaissette hurried on; he had brought with him Girard, the orderly, who wished to say good-bye to his officer.

The remainder of the Battalion was following. They were to have a few hours' rest before returning to the inferno; indeed, it was uncertain whether the unit was strong enough to continue the battle before the arrival of the reinforcements that had been demanded from the depot.

The three divisional ambulances had been established at Buzanthesis, one in the church, one in a stable, and one in the village school. There was work for all three; the place was one vast scene of suffering.

For some days a staff had been billeted there. It was therefore an important headquarters and a supply dump. The enemy airmen had observed this, and the place had been deluged with shells.

Not a house was intact. The streets were encumbered by the *débris* of shattered walls. Through the open doors you could see the sunlight pouring in through the holes in the roofs. Everything had been turned inside out by the shells and the passing troops. Furniture and crockery were heaped, like refuse, on the tiled floors of living-rooms and kitchens. Soldiers of all armies went in and out of the violated dwellings. Such havoc had the war brought upon the peaceful life of this little provincial town. Before our regiment arrived, patrols of uhlans and chevan-légers had occupied it several times over. All the cellars were open. A broken stone staircase led to the lawyer's office; in the great stiff-looking room the boxes had been burst open and the floor was littered with deeds and minutes, the accumulation of a hundred years. Here a kitchen had just been installed, and while the dinner was on the fire, the cooks were amusing themselves by reading wills and leases which they found some difficulty in deciphering. Of the priest's house not a wall was left standing, but the rose-trees in the garden had been respected by the cyclone, and in the midst of the ruin and desolation the loveliest roses were in full bloom.

In the village the confusion was beyond description. Despatch-riders arrived, cyclists carried messages, motors dashed through. On every hand sappers were laying telephone wires along the ground in such numbers that you might have imagined they were putting up a barbed-wire entanglement. Supply columns arrived; wagons of every shape and colour stopped to inquire their way, and obstructed the traffic. The men

shouted and cursed each other. Sections of ammunition columns passed through in endless succession; companies of infantry marched along on their way to the firing line. A squadron of hussars insisted on watering at the village pump, blocking the road and bringing the disorder to its climax. The police apostrophised the soldiers, but no one understood what they said; stragglers were looking for their regiments—Zouaves, infantry, *chasseurs*, negroes. The ceaseless noise of moving wagons filled the air like the roar of a torrent or the rushing of the wind in the trees. And above all, there was no end to the procession of wounded.

The fight was not over. You could still hear the din of it, the familiar sound of the guns. But the enemy had retreated, and now the village was beyond the range of his artillery. It might well be called the other side of battle. A few miles away was the firing-line where the bloodshed was still going on, a tragedy both grim and long; attack after attack, units melting as in a furnace, stubble and grass-land strewn with corpses. But a magnificent tragedy! The men rushing into the furnace, the lights and noises in the air, the bloody onrush of vast masses telling its tale of willing sacrifice, all the delirious phantasmagoria of Death marking the stages on the path of Victory. Here you could see nothing of all this but the inevitable disorder behind the scenes, the ruined masonry and all those wounds.

Before entering the village Vaissette had suffered acute mental anguish. They had fought just there, in

the fields. He even recognised one of the trenches taken from the Prussians. And it was the battlefield viewed after the battle, when the horrible music of small-arms and artillery has ceased and peace has settled upon it, when it no longer floats in a haze of enthusiasm and glory. Two burnt-out farms were still smouldering; there was no flame, but a heavy black smoke and not a breath of air to disperse it. Arms and equipment lay on the ground. Heaps of bright shell-cases marked battery positions. Bodies lay stiff and stark. The wounded had been picked up by the stretcher-bearers. The Territorials were now burying the dead, assisted by a few civilians. Groups of men were walking over the plain, stooping now and again to put a corpse on the bier; they would take it to the trench and throw it in, while others filled the hole with lime and covered it with earth. Already there was a small army of crosses marking the graves in the fields.

Our men were buried first; the scarlet and blue patches formed by their trousers and greatcoats grew fewer and fewer, the grave-diggers were active. And the sadness was all the greater. Their bright uniforms, standing out in the sunlight, were still a little of themselves, a little of their poor personality. Now the last vestiges disappeared; nothing was left of their obscure devotion and their nameless glory. The sacred earth covered their remains and with her clods and dust jealously enclosed their martyr-bodies. The soil received again her sons who had died for her. She had called for the great sacrifice; she had drunk the blood of the victims slain on the grass, the furrow or the

new-mown corn, as though on altars. She gathered them all to her impassive mother-breast. The others were buried too; and this task was more repugnant to the soldiers, though they carried it out with the same piety. There was no time to waste; the stench was already appalling; the indescribable odour of flesh putrefying in the sun was spreading all over the countryside.

The horses were buried, their legs standing out stiff and straight, like iron bars, their bellies swollen almost to bursting. The men sprinkled them with paraffin and set a light to them, to burn the flesh, the bones were broken or sawn off; and all returned to earth.

Such was the battlefield. It had throbbed with life and energy when the tide of death was breaking over it; now it was pervaded by the infinite sadness of lifeless things. And the most piteous sight was perhaps not the piles of spent ammunition and abandoned equipment nor the scattered corpses; but the innumerable broken bottles which always mark the passage of Prussian troops, the mattresses and chairs looted from peaceful homes and dragged into the trenches, the thousand and one odd things whose presence there seemed inexplicable, a table standing on three legs, a peasant girl's black petticoat, a child's doll.

Vaissette and Girard reached the village square of Buzanthesis. The wounded were coming in, slowly, from the firing-line and aid-posts, leaning on rifles or sticks, staggering along, some deathly white, others red and bloated. Some wore bandages soaked with blood; Heaven knows what strength of will kept them going

in spite of their wounds. Wagons and farm carts came in with men who had not been able to walk, and were unloaded with all speed. Carriages, motors and ambulances were leaving for the railroad with the men who were fit to travel. The motors throbbed, the ambulance-drivers lashed their horses, the bustle and noise were bewildering.

Vaissette made his way to the village school. The doctors were operating in the covered playground. The orderlies brought in unceasing relays of bodies on stretchers. Tables had been set up and covered with mattresses or sheets which soon became sodden with blood. At each table an officer, surrounded by two or three assistants, was bending over a wound. One orderly was detailed to the sole duty of fetching buckets from the pump and then pouring away the blood-stained water. A quart of blood was enough to turn clean water to a scarlet colour, so that the man appeared to be pouring rivers of blood over the yard. The wounded, lying in rows on the bare ground or on straw, awaited their turns, some in a state of fever, others calmly. They lay down on the table; and, to waste no time, their uniforms and field-dressings were ripped open. Some trembled like children; but the majority were stoical. The steel scissors, the slender knives, the surgical saws, gleamed in the sunlight. It was one never-ending arrival and despatch of cases for operation, the most pitiable accumulation imaginable of bruised limbs and tortured flesh.

The doctors had to probe the wound to find the bullet or shell-splinter, and remove what they could of

the cloth dragged in by the projectile; they had to cut off fingers hanging by a mere shred, and sever limbs attacked by gangrene and mortification. They had not even time to speak words of encouragement to their patients. They had been working since the day before, sweating and breathless, cutting and bandaging the wounds without a second's respite, their overalls wet and red with the mingled blood of hundreds of men. The place was stifling and reeked with the various odours of chloroform, the sweat of terror, the fetid smell of decomposing organisms, while the open windows let in the foul stench of the corpses.

And still the door opened to admit fresh cases; under the windows moved the grey ambulance-wagons and all the country carts that could be found, jolting along the roads with their burdens of the most hideous human anguish.

The bearers had no time to wash the bodies, which were as dirty as the clothes. The earth bit into the lacerated flesh, threatening infection. Sometimes no wound could be seen but a tiny hole, which was hard to discover, at the elbow-joint, or in the chest or abdomen. A bullet had sometimes gone clean through, hardly leaving a trace of its foul work; in other cases the wound was enormous, the flesh was lacerated and of a purple or blueish colour, exposing the bone and deep-lying muscles. To all this bleeding anguish the ambulance men applied snowy lint, whose very whiteness seemed a promise of health and redemption. The fracture or wound was bound up and quickly the patient was carried away to make room for another.

A squeeze of the sponge, a fresh jug of water, and it was all over. Now and again the orderly, as he went out to empty his bucket, carried under his arm an amputated limb, a poor limb which but a minute ago was alive, and threw it into a pit at the bottom of the garden.

The garden with its shady plane-trees was also filled with wounded, shouting their agony, or unconscious from weakness. These gazed with terror on the comings and goings of the wretched orderly. Their eyes were starting from their sockets. The setting sun shed over them and all their pain the grace of his light, and on the wall the leaves of the Virginia creeper, reddened by Autumn, rustled in the soft evening breeze.

Vaissette asked a stretcher-bearer where his brother-officer lay. The man did not know. "Go upstairs," said he; "you will find some of the serious cases there." And on the first floor, in the schoolmistress' room, there were still a number of men lying on a thin layer of straw. They were huddled together on the bed of pain. Some had nightmares and imagined, in their fever, that the battle was still in progress. They would shout: "Forward!—Lie down!—Charge!" Others breathed out an unceasing stifled moaning. A roar of pain would rend the air, whenever any man made an incautious movement. Vaissette noticed two or three *chasseurs* of his own Battalion and went up to them to cheer them. He felt a desire to embrace them. He recognised Corporal Gros; a bullet had entered at his ear, and made its exit through the eye, which it had torn from its socket. But Gros could not speak.

In a little room adjoining, three beds had been collected and in addition there were two mattresses on the floor. The shutters were closed. The silence was impressive. It was like entering a death-chamber. Lucien Fabre was dozing on a bed; the presence of Vaissette aroused him and he opened his eyes and smiled.

"How are you?" inquired Vaissette.

"I think they'll let me keep my arm," replied Lucien.

With an almost maternal affection he surveyed the bandage surrounding the damaged limb. He spoke in a low voice, but fluently, and his cheeks were slightly flushed.

"I thought you would be killed," said Fabre. (The two men had instinctively addressed each other for the first time with the familiar *tu, toi.*)

"I have not been touched," replied Vaissette. He felt, as he had felt the day before, a sort of shame at being there, alive and unwounded, in the midst of so much blood and suffering.

"And the whole company has been killed?" asked Lucien.

Vaissette told him there were still about thirty on duty. Fabre would not believe him. Like all wounded men, he insisted on supposing that all his brother-officers and men had been hit.

"We have taken Laumont," Vaissette explained.

"Laumont?" murmured Lucien.

He did not understand. He had completely forgotten the name of the village before which he had fallen.

He remembered only the barbed wire and the clods of earth which bounded his horizon while he was lying on the battlefield.

"You remember," began Lucien, "how we used to want a bed. Well, I wasn't a bit pleased when they gave me this one. I'm in too much pain." He spoke very fast and in a loud voice; Vaissette understood that he was tiring him.

"I shall leave you now," said he; "I shall come and see you again, if you have not been evacuated. Girard, who is here, has given me the company cash. You will be evacuated. Get well soon, and perhaps you will be able to rejoin in three months, if the campaign is not over." He kissed his pale fevered brow, and retired with the orderly.

He went away with death in his heart. He had been in contact with too much suffering, and the visit to Lucien completed his discomfiture. His friend was not in danger, he did not seem to be in pain; but the words he had spoken were simple and without depth, like the speech of a child. Vaissette had utterly failed to discover moral beauty in this suffering or grandeur in the agonies he had witnessed. In this refuge of the afflicted he had not experienced the divine intoxication of battle. Nowhere had he found the resignation of the martyr who with passionate faith endures torment for a sacred cause.

He had seen only mangled bodies, pools of blood, cries of anguish, all the elemental simplicity of physical pain.

PART III

CHAPTER XI

IN SPITE OF THE STORM

ON this particular day, Madame Courtois felt prettier than ever, as she sat out in her garden in a wicker chair, awaiting the promised call of Lieutenant Lucien Fabre. The warm rays of the March sun proclaimed the Spring. They had covered the hedges with bud and blossom. The trees of the gardens seemed to vie with each other in grace of form and delicacy of colour. The dainty pink and white blossoms of the cherry, the almond and the peach opened to the warm caress of the Southern sun.

Marguerite Courtois, like every one else, had left Paris during the last days of August. What was there for her to do in the capital, where in case of siege she would be but one of the "bouches inutiles."

One fine morning she had alighted from the train at Meillanne, where the Courtois had just inherited some land and a little house. She did not know the Provence and was immediately charmed with the country. No other atmosphere or landscape could possibly have been better suited to the healthy charm of her young womanhood. Her lissom waist and full hips were such as sculptors dream of; her slim ankles revealed a promise of limbs both strong and agile; her

neck was slender and divinely white; but the fresh girlish whiteness of her skin was belied by a bust of classical maturity. A small mouth, with moist, very red lips, eyes hazel or grey according to the season or the hour, sparkling with wit and merriment, and to crown this perfect specimen of physical beauty, a heavy mass of soft black hair.

It did indeed seem as though all her surroundings had been designed as a background for her charms—the joy of the Southern landscape, the tender shade of the almond trees in the meadows, the trellised vines in front of the little white houses, the bloom of the orchards, the sunlight streaming down on the dusty roads, on field and valley. Marguerite was happy; laughter was in her heart.

She took possession of her domain. A willow walk led to a clump of bamboo and box. All kinds of plants grew in the garden with equal vigour and in delightful confusion. The house, flanked by tall palms, was a kind of tower whose white stones glistened in the sun, and a grove of olives, dying of age, but still leafy and many of them covered with a sheath of ivy, suggested the sacred groves of Hellas.

Marguerite declared she was in the most lovely spot in the most lovely country in the world. Her short skirt, as she wandered through the fields, called up the image of a Dorian tunic, and Marguerite herself might have been the huntress, Diana. You thought of her bathing with her nymphs in some stream of Arcady. But there was a languor in her lovely form that soon dispelled the image of the chaste virgin, and presented

in its stead that of a Roman Venus, robust, voluptuous and full-fleshed, nude as the Aphrodite which Praxiteles presented to the dazzled eyes of the citizens of Cindos.

The arrival of Madame Courtois created a revolution in Meillanne. At any other time the ladies might have been inclined to judge her severely; but in the little town, they had themselves resolved upon unity, and in a very short time Marguerite was held in great honour and commiseration when it became known that her husband was a prisoner of war.

"He was captured in one of the very first engagements," said she; "I might have expected as much."

And the laugh in her big grey eyes explained the indulgent irony of her words. For the rest, she was all animation and activity. The little town was asleep; and she began to wake it up. There was a pretty piece of agitation when she discovered they were doing nothing for the defence of France, except knitting socks—an occupation not at all to her taste. She created an auxiliary hospital. Doctor Constantin had been left unmobilised; and there was an old dilapidated convent, from which the sisters had been expelled in the days when the government of France proposed to extinguish the lights of the firmament. What more was needed? Every family contributed beds, sheets or blankets; and the gifts came quickly, for Marguerite had considerable influence and all the necessary authority. So the hospital was established.

Kitchen and offices, linen-room and dispensary, operating-theatre and wards were white-washed and

immaculate; the cloister with its orange-trees and exotic plants suggested an Italian monastery. Each of the dear ladies had her work and her hours of duty. Everything was complete—except for the patients.

No patients arrived. Meillanne is too near Tarascon. The military authorities cannot have taken quite seriously this outburst of activity on the part of the noblest of its fair citizens. The latter had at first been proud in their praise of Marguerite, who had been the life and soul of this sterile devotion and instead of alienating their sympathies by becoming president or treasurer, had refused all honours whatever. Now they began to question her zeal. The good ladies were in an uncomfortable position; the women of the lower classes seemed to hide behind their *pessiennes* and laugh at them as they walked home from the hospital. The most violent of Marguerite's critics was the lawyer's wife.

Madame Thiers was short, very dark and very ugly. At Meillanne her name was pronounced in the same tone in which Frenchmen of a former generation used to say "Monsieur Thiers." Her lips always looked pinched and her chest had always been flat. She invariably wore grey filoselle gloves and a yellow bodice. She was held in high esteem, especially since the outbreak of the war, because of her sons. The younger was a staff-secretary. No one knew exactly what that meant or what his rank was; as a matter of fact, this valuable young man, who really was a staff secretary, was employed in expending ink on those futile minutes and memoranda which are the glory of our military

administration. At Meillanne he was supposed to be at least the intimate collaborator and right-hand man of the Commander-in-chief to whom France had entrusted her destinies. The other son was not in the army. "His heart is too big," she explained. He was a conceited little fool, who, possessing neither learning nor ability had set off for Paris to take the capital by storm and make a name for himself in the world of letters. He was not a soldier, but he had a select and responsible post; the government, it was said, had appointed him prefect of conquered towns. Meanwhile he awaited the occupation of Strasbourg or Aix-la-Chapelle, to go and confer on the Teutonic barbarians the blessings of the Latin peace.

Marguerite understood that her popularity was at stake, and promptly telegraphed to friends at Paris and Marseilles. A few days later a convoy of wounded was announced.

It was to arrive at noon, in motors, for Meillanne does not lie on the great railway running along the Rhône valley, but nestles in idleness under the first sunny buttresses of the Alps. At eleven o'clock the whole personnel of the hospital was waiting in a state of high excitement. The white overalls made a brave show in the sunlight. Madame Thiers, as president, stood in the forefront of the group with Doctor Constantin, who carried his seventy years gallantly. The municipal officers were there, and the town band, at least such of its members as were not mobilized, was to play the *Marseillaise* when the convoy arrived. Finally, all the young men who had joined the Society

were there with stretchers—a host of voluntary bearers of zealous and almost as numerous as those of Lourdes.

About one o'clock a dusty car drew up at the hospital; this was the convoy. So great was the surprise created by its arrival that the band forgot to strike up the *Marseillaise*. A soldier alighted briskly; no one ever discovered what was the matter with him or why he had been sent to Meillanne. He was followed by a second, who had caught whooping-cough at his depot, and a third who had got his fingers crushed in a railway carriage. That was all. The convoy disappeared through the porch into the sunny court.

Madame Thiers was, notwithstanding, a person of great importance for two days. She supervised the care of the patients and was for ever running to and fro between the wards and the garden. It was even whispered that one day, on returning from the cloister, where she had been cutting some flowers, to the theatre, where the doctor was amputating one of his patient's fingers, she had handed her garden-scissors to the doctor who, bending over his patient, had demanded his forceps and scissors. The story had a wide circulation.

The peasant women of Meillanne had their husbands and sons in the firing-line. The sons of the soil have throughout the war been the strong bulwark of France, and have borne the brunt of our casualties. As always happens, they have watered with their blood the soil they had so long watered with the sweat of their brow. The women vaguely felt that these sons of *bourgeois* were shirking, and they said so; they bore no good-will towards the ladies of the hospital, and

openly laughed when they met them in the street. Marguerite was compelled to wire for a second convoy.

It was sent, and others followed it. Alas! There was work enough for all the hospitals in France. Meillanne had her wounded soldiers, and nursed them tenderly and well. And so it came to pass that Lucien Fabre arrived one evening and made the acquaintance of Marguerite Courtois.

His wound was healing. He could not move his arm, but he could go out of doors. This visit to Marguerite he had put off for some time, feeling that it would be a landmark in his life. Hitherto he had restricted his conversation with her to an exchange of commonplaces; but he was dazzled by her sunny beauty. She had bandaged his wound, and he remembered the sweet warm scent of her radiant skin, as she leaned over him.

Lucien Fabre walked out of the hospital, bewildered by the bright sunlight. Overjoyed to find himself once more a live man, he filled his lungs with the warm air. Like one returned from the land of the dead, he saw all the fair things around him as though he beheld them for the first time. He took the road pointed out to him, which led to the house where Madame Courtois lived. The river was on his right, almost lost to view in its bed of white stones, and from the water there arose a slight haze. In the glaring sun the mountains stood out bare and white against the intense deep blue of the sky. The whole countryside was asleep, except for the crickets. From far down the dusty road came the faint tinkle of horse-bells as the diligence lumbered

along. The indolence, the healthy joy and peaceful life of the landscape, the pungent odours distilled from the scorched earth, the soft thyme-scented mistral brought the tears to Lucien's eyes. Then as though revealed by a flash of lightning, he saw once more, in the glare of this same sun, Nicolaï lying a corpse with crossed arms, the hell on the slopes of Laumont, the trench now held by his battalion in the mud of Flanders. He could not understand the injustice which allowed this province to be so radiantly beautiful, while other parts of the soil of France, under the heel of the Prussian, groaned and were dyed with blood.

Lucien opened the door of Marguerite's house and was soon in her presence. She wore a white linen dress cut very low at the neck. Her short skirt gave free play to her ankles which were clad in pink silk stockings, hardly distinguishable from the bare skin. A big straw hat added a touch of rusticity. Her costume, her pose, the background formed by the tenure with its yellow roses, all made up a picture of studied elegance. Laughingly, she exclaimed:

"I have turned into a peasant."

But Lucien found no appropriate reply, and Marguerite began to make conversation. She talked of Paris, she talked of Meillanne, she even talked of the war. She wanted Lucien to tell her his adventures; but he, from a sort of bashful reserve, did not dare to talk to this young woman, with the gleam of eternal mockery in her eyes, about the long-drawn sufferings of his men and the bloody mystery of battle.

However, he spoke of Vaissette. She was wildly amused at the picture of the scholar-sergeant losing his glasses and philosophising under fire. Then her hazel eyes darkened and her dainty nostrils quivered and contracted when Lucien told her some of their conversations and some episodes of which Vaissette was the hero. She understood.

After that, Lucien let himself go and described all the scenes that haunted his imagination. He poured out his heart to her, for he had just discovered to his delight that this beautiful girl, the very incarnation of sweetness and springtime, was, like her sisters, permeated by the world's anguish.

"How interested you are in all these things!" he whispered.

Shuddering, she drew closer to Lucien, as if to seek his protection. Then she replied:

"You are my hero."

They spoke no more; but they did not fear to follow the bent of their thoughts, and were content to sit together in silence. When they parted, Lucien said to Marguerite, very simply:

"How I love you!"

She answered only by a smile.

They were no more surprised than if it had been the hundredth time he had made his confession.

They had entered an enchanted land; they loved with a wild passion like those lovers of old legends who knew that their time was short. Spring was passing, and the primroses and hawthorns and fruit trees had now the company of all the flowers of the fields. Even

the nights were mild and perfumed by the privet and flowering vines. They wandered along the valleys, under shady walks of oleander, and up the rocky mountain paths. They were always together. Lucien spent the whole day with Marguerite, whether she came to hospital for her turn of duty or he met her at her own home. In the evening he would sit by the window and think of her, writing long letters to Vaissette to tell him of his happiness, or smoking his pipe and watching the moon rise higher and higher in the sky, while he called to mind her big dark eyes, the sigh that caught her throat when they spoke of the parting that was so near, and then suddenly he seemed to feel the soft warm body nestling so close to him.

"I am compromising you," said Lucien one day. "Madame Thiers must be saying fine things about us."

"Madame Thiers," answered Marguerite, "is too much taken up with her hospital and her sons, whom the wicked men who make our laws will probably send to the front. In any case, I don't care. I shall go back to Paris as soon as you leave, and I shall never come back to this house where we have been so happy in our love."

The time for Lucien's departure was approaching. His wound was healing; his battalion was asking for him; Vaissette prophesied an offensive. Now that he loved, he felt how much more cruel the tragedy would be; but he knew that weakness would ever be as foreign to his character as in the past, he knew that he would be as patient and bold as ever—only his heart would bleed more.

The day before he left, Madame Courtois invited him to dinner, together with Doctor Constantin, who had been in charge of him, a kindly and genial old cynic, who had had but two passions in all his life—the Republic, under the Empire, and since that same Republic had been established, his collection of insects and moths. He had had long conversations with the army officer, who had conceived a genuine affection for him.

"I can imagine my friend Vaissette being just like you, forty-five years hence," Lucien would say.

"Possibly," agreed the doctor. "But you will look back on your youth as sanctified by events such as we never knew."

And this was the tone of their conversation on this last afternoon.

"Were you not twenty years old in 1870," asked Marguerite, "as our young friends are now in 1915?"

"It was not the same thing," said the doctor. "For all the bloodshed it involved the war of 1870 was but one of those minor episodes which mark the relations between two nations. This time it is a question of life or death for us. Our whole race feels it, and the whole land of France has been stirred."

"Do you think so?" asked Lucien.

Madame Courtois pressed the question. She thought of the two sons of Madame Thiers, who were dug-in so securely, and she gave utterance to her thoughts, adding:

"They are not the only ones."

No indeed, they were not the only ones, and the doc-

tor was well aware of it. The workmen in the great manufacturing centres, the whole intellectual aristocracy of the country, the bourgeois, and the great mass of the peasantry had marched as one man towards the violated frontiers. But in these sleepy little provincial towns there had been too much selfishness and clever evasion.

"My son is at the front," said the lawyer to the magistrates' clerk.

As a matter of fact, his son had made himself indispensable in the recruiting-office at Montélimar. But for how many of these people the front begins at Montélimar!

"We can say that in the present company," laughed Marguerite, "since none of us can be offended; I am only a woman; you, Doctor, are seventy years old, and our friend Lucien Fabre has been in the firing-line and is going back to it tomorrow."

The imminent departure of her lover made her feel more acutely than ever the injustice of it all.

"You say," added Lucien, "that the whole land has been stirred. But here, the people hardly suspect that there is a war. The communiqués are still conscientiously posted up, morning and evening, on the doors of the town hall and post-office; but no one comes to read them now. And then, look at the little town, and the whole country round; how are they affected by the storm that is raging from the North Sea dunes to the crests of the Vosges?" He pointed to Meillanne slumbering at the mountain's foot, in the warm sunlight of Provence, the fields where the green corn was already

standing high, and the trees with their new garment of big leaves.

"Don't judge too hastily," said the doctor gravely; "it is nothing short of a miracle that these crops have been able to grow. The vines, though not treated with sulphate, will soon be heavy with red grapes, and the olive-trees, unpruned, will bear their ripe fruit this winter. The old men, the women and children have put their backs into the work, and carried on cheerfully with a simple and dogged persistence, in spite of the news too often brought by the *maire*, that the head of the family had watered with his blood the hills of the Meuse or the canals of Flanders. It is the soil that inspires these women with their passive courage, even as it inspired their husbands with the will to sacrifice their lives. Men and women have drawn from the depths of the soil the unconscious patriotism which is revealed to you and to me."

"I seem to be listening to my friend Vaissette," interrupted Lucien. "The experience of war brought us to the same conclusions that you have reached through your experience of life and daily contact with the country people."

"Yes," replied the doctor; "this is where you see in full force our country's will to live, showing the humblest of our peasant women their duties. In spite of the storm that despoils the cliffs of the Aisne and the crests of the Vosges, this summer and autumn will not be cheated of their harvest and vintage. Life will go on. The gale of madness and glory beating down from the east is broken by the barrier formed by your bodies.

You are the sentinels posted to prevent it from passing, so that the continuity of our lives may be preserved under the shelter you provide. Your function is that of the cypresses of our Rhône Valley, standing side by side along the roads and fields to screen from the *mistral* the regular journeys of the coaches and the growth of the crops. Don't think of the individual weakness you have quoted; a little mud is soon dissolved in the vast waters of the everlasting sea. What you took for indifference here, was the wise resolution of this land to play her part, and that is, to be radiantly beautiful as in the past. She feels the sufferings of the other poor bits of land, trampled by armies on the march, torn and rent by the spade of the enemy. But that does not prevent her from developing in the light of the sun. To each his own part. If your arm was wounded, that was no reason why your lungs and heart should cease to fulfil their normal functions. I tell you that there is inspiration in the sight of the land playing its own part in the war. Go forth, my dear boy, with the more courage and confidence, because in spite of the hurricane our friend Madame Courtois has not parted with her smile and her low-necked dress, and because our laurels of Provence still bloom with their poetic flowers and still put forth those evergreen leaves with which we shall soon be making a wreath to crown your head."

Lucien took leave of Marguerite the following evening, feeling so utterly desolate that he could have wished to die there and then. A yellow ray of sunlight, the last of that glorious evening, had deserted

the drawing-room. A dainty little clock had struck six: it was the hour agreed. He had kissed her for the last time. She was very white, but had not held him back. Both knew they would never meet again.

At eight, he was to take the carriage which would drive him to the station. For the last time he trod the road from Marguerite's house to the hospital. He knew all the landmarks by heart, the wall, the hedge, the little bridge. The things he was about to leave seemed more familiar to him than ever. Slowly and yearningly he gazed on the road along which he had walked so often with Marguerite, who would run ahead of him with strong nimble grace, or lean her lithe body on his arm. He saw once more in his mind's eye the golden colour of the path bathed in the sun and its blue shadows when they had walked by moonlight.

He had grown older; and now that he loved, he had a clearer conception of the cruelty of war. He saw the lowest depths of the great human tragedy. At the thought of all the creatures who had loved, who had been a living part of the wife or lover at home, and now slept under the trampled earth with the rude crosses of the battle-fields above them, he shuddered.

And yet by some strange process, he felt that the greater his sacrifice, the greater was the power that enabled him to make it.

"Is it," he asked himself, "because I shall feel that I am fighting to defend Marguerite?"

No doubt, that was the reason. But that was not all. His gaze embraced (once more) the valley lying

steeped in the calm of night, the little town now so familiar, the path he loved.

“It is not for her alone that I shall be fighting, but for all this country-side of which she was a living part, for all this soil that has brought me under the influence of its mysterious will to live.”

In the heart of the peaceful province it had been brought home to Fabre, as it had been brought home to Vaissette and de Quéré in the firing-line, that the force which guided them all was the call of the soil of France.

CHAPTER XII

THE MONOTONY OF THE TRENCHES

LIEUTENANT VAISSETTE explained to his men: "When it is dark we shall move out of the trench. We have to dig a new trench two hundred yards ahead. We are too far off the enemy for the great push. Number Three Company will take up a position in front of us, to cover us against any possible attack."

Vaissette was in high spirits. He had that very morning received a letter from Fabre, to say that he was at the depot fit for service and about to return to the front, and this news coincided with a general reorganisation of the Battalion, especially of the officers, with a view to the general attack expected towards the end of spring.

De Quéré had just had an officer, *sous-lieutenant* Richard, posted to his company. Sorre, who had returned and commanded Number Four Company during the winter, had been appointed to command a battalion. Vaissette was the only officer with the company, which would undoubtedly be given to Fabre as soon as he returned. These two would thus complete together the campaign they had begun in Lorraine.

"Only Nicolai will be missing," thought Vaissette; "but to make up, we shall have de Quéré."

The sun was setting on the vast plains of Flanders. The evening was glorious and balmy, the smiling close of a spring day. Twilight lingered on the grass, which now stood as high as the barbed wire; the soft warm tints of green were splashed with the brighter colours of wild flowers, and the poppies stood out like stains of blood on the carpet of grass.

And now the mild spring night was upon them, and from earth and the souls of men a sigh of relief seemed to arise. A vast peace overspread the country-side, while men thought of home and could hardly believe that this was war.

"The corn must be standing high by now," said Servajac. He always associated the incidents of weather and season with labours of the soil.

Captain de Quéré's patrols had scattered over the ground, under cover of the friendly shades of evening. Not a sound was heard. The sky, still aglow with the light of day, showed not a star—yes, one; the *chasseurs* gazed wistfully on the evening star which seemed to live and breathe before their eyes, as they lay full length amongst the rank growths that had taken possession of the fields deserted by man, among the growing beets whose stems formed little bells, sweet-scented as sugar and honey.

Vaissette moved out his company, and they set to work. There was a long trench to dig, which would become the new front line. The enemy was a hundred yards off; he was not firing. The very silence was full of terrors, and the men felt the strain of wielding pick and shovel, carrying out the ancestral rites of their

toil, repeating the familiar acts of their daily life here in the presence of the enemy, more than they would have felt the strain of using their rifles to reply to a fusillade or repulse an attack.

What were the Germans doing? Vaissette imagined all manner of terrible things. True, the patrols of Number Three Company were a few yards in front; but they might be brushed aside and the Prussians might be upon him before he had time to breathe. In vain he tried to pierce the mystery of the night; he could not see two yards before his face. From time to time he would walk ahead as far as the patrols. Nothing stirred. He would have liked to push forward to the German line, to make sure; but he would have been shot by our own men on his return. Then he would come back to his men who were digging. Some had kept their coats on and their rifles slung, and made haste to dig a hole, so as to have some cover. Others, more cowardly, had made no progress at all, because they had remained lying on the ground. He could not be everywhere at once; he must, before all things, have patience and allow the night to pass while the work was in progress.

Vaissette decided to lie on his back and gaze into the night. Never, he thought, had the sky been so serenely beautiful.

"How many of these men," he reflected, "are unwittingly digging the trench that will be their own last resting-place. These shovellers are their own grave-diggers. What poet will sing of the beauty of their actions? Is not their labour a symbol of the poor toil

of humanity? Man kills himself and digs his own grave. The toil of the learned and all human progress result only in the invention of the most varied and terrible apparatus imaginable, whose sole end is to destroy our fellow-men. My Voltairian soul has long doubted the existence of God; this war supplies the definite negation."

"Does it supply the affirmation of Reason?" asked a voice.

It was de Quéré, who had come out to join the subaltern; and the conversation continued under the peaceful stars.

"You see in all this," proceeded de Quéré, "a refutation of my doctrines; and I see a refutation of yours. This war is the bankruptcy of Reason. Don't your Stoïcs hold that the world is governed by inflexible laws and that man is governed by Reason? Does not your Lucretius tell us that the terror and darkness of the soul are scattered not by the sun and the bright rays of day, but by Knowledge and Reason? To what use do we put Knowledge? Where is Reason?"

"Let us confess," replied Vaissette, "that in spite of priests and philosophers, a storm of madness is raging furiously over the earth. I persist in hoping, since absolute scepticism is untenable, that from this tribulation there will come forth a race of men who will be all the better for having looked death in the face."

"This land of France," agreed de Quéré, "has climbed its Calvary to reach the Paschal beauties of the eternal resurrection."

"Is it not wonderful," said Vaissette, "how we can

accommodate the realities of the world of things to our own theories? Nothing that happens can prove or disprove anything. In spite of the tragedy, or because of it, God, in your view, exists. In my view, if the Reason of the outward world is tottering to its fall, the great principals of my masters are unshaken; for the divine Epicurus, sitting in his garden on just such a bland night as this, taught his friends that chance alone, and not divine thought or Reason, presides over the course of the world, and my beloved Lucretius affirms the perverse stupidity of the universe, which aims at no goal, but moves forward, crushing all obstacles in its path."

Meanwhile, the working-party had completed its task. The trench was big enough to provide cover, and the dawn was at hand. Captain de Quéré brought in his men, and Vaissette went on with the earthwork. The soil was excavated and thrown up to form the parapet, and gradually the trench grew deep enough to deflade its occupants, while allowing them to fire over the top, wide enough to allow movement, yet not so wide as to offer an easy mark for the enemy's shells.

These were hard days for Vaissette. He was as completely isolated as if he had been on a desert island, cut off from the battalion and the living world, alone in the advanced trench. Supplies could only come up by night. Without a pause his *chasseurs* prolonged the earthwork, and at last it became possible to make a communicating trench which joined it up to the old front line. The following night was devoted to the organisation of parapet and abatis, and lastly the wire in

front. The German sentries were but a few yards away. Servajac, Angielli, Sergeant Batisti and the officer drove in the pickets, which, in order to muffle the sound of hammering, were covered with rags cut from the capes and jackets of the dead. From picket to picket the wire was stretched, and the men who had carried out all this work under incessant strain, like sailors on the forward deck, too much exposed to the fury of the waves, felt their confidence returning as the wire spread wider and wider its guardian devilry. Then life resumed its monotonous round in the new trench. The latter was improved; then, a few yards to the rear, a second was dug, where every man had his corner, his shelter, his home. Names were given to all the new trenches; there was the Boyau de la Cannebière, in honour of Angielli; Boyau d'Horace, christened by Vaissette; Boyau Nicolaï, in memory of the captain.

By day they slept. The men played cards or smoked stolidly without saying a word. They cleaned their arms, they wrote home, they dozed. Their chief amusements were an occasional harmless bombardment or a passing aeroplane, whose evolutions they would follow, trying to recognise under the luminous wings the tricolor or the black cross; they made bets when the machines were surrounded by little puffs of smoke from our anti-aircraft shells. Vaissette made reports, sketches, defence-schemes, and produced a goodly pile of documents for Battalion Headquarters.

Night had its terrors, of course; the young officer was not getting hardened to them, even after so many

months of campaigning. War and Duty had come to mean something infinitely more simple than in the past, less grandiose, more completely stripped of all philosophical trappings: they meant one thing, and one thing only: to hold on, to hold on at all costs, to hold on against every bombardment, to hold on against every attack, to hold on by sticking to the ground, to hold on, till death, to the little trench entrusted to his keeping. This was the whole duty of a soldier.

From sunset till dawn his mind was obsessed by this idea. He would listen intently to all the sounds of the night, the rustling of the grass, the distant song, the coming and going of ration-parties in the communicating trench, a sharp burst of rifle-fire or shelling. He did not dare to sleep; he was alone in his leaky headquarters. He could not stay in one place; he would patrol the trench, visit the sentries at the parapet, go out to a listening-post sapped out towards the German lines. He would restore confidence to the sentry there, who heard every minute, in imagination, the footsteps of an enemy patrol.

Then the rain began to pour down for days on end, and life was one unending and intolerable weariness. All the men's clothes were soaked; they lived in a moisture which saturated skin and muscles. They were discouraged at the thought of their own impotence in the face of the elements. The mud rose above their ankles; in places it would draw you in up to the knees. The earth oozed and discharged a sweat of yellow blood. They dug drains and sump-holes, but in vain; the rain went on and the water rose in the trench,

trickling into the shelters and making its way from trench to trench all along the line. It flowed from one of the new firing-trenches which seemed to be a spring, and soon swelled to a stream, carrying along haversacks, timber, and decomposed corpses disinterred by the water. The mist made the nights longer; it seemed as though autumn were returning and the darkness with all its horrors were never to end. The drizzle and mist swamped all visibility; you could not see beyond the wire. At the same time the artillery on either side was beginning to show more activity; heavy shells were continually passing overhead, so that there was never complete quiet for a minute. The ration-parties had great difficulty in reaching them, for the communicating trenches were well-nigh impassable; the mud gripped your feet, it clogged your boots and clung to the wretched cooks, who would arrive caked with clay and streaming wet, bringing up food not fit to eat. Every hour seemed a century, but somehow they dragged on. The men shivered as they sat on a fire-step of sticky clay, with their feet in the thick liquid at the bottom of the trench. They would try to keep warm by wrapping themselves in a blanket as wet as their clothes. What *could* they do? A short walk to stretch their legs—a peep into the murky night. That was all.

The night has passed: the day is almost as dark, and quite as gloomy, and quite as wet, and quite as cold, and quite as long.

In the rear, there are houses with nicely polished wood floors, carpets and rugs, fire-places, and beds

with sheets; there are gardens in which the sun shines on trees in blossom.

Under the ceaseless downpour, the most talkative have been reduced to silence. The trenches in rainy weather are as quiet as a churchyard. The men meekly bow their heads under the bombardment and the storm; their feet are frozen, their backs bent double. They don't complain; you might think they had grown accustomed to the life. They think of nobody and nothing. Without emotion they endure this torrential rain, as if an episode in a series of events beyond their understanding. They have lost all will, they have lost all desire, all the enthusiasm and unconscious faith of the early days. But they are neither sorry to be there nor hopeful of returning to their homes. They bow to the yoke like patient oxen. They do not think, they take this existence for granted, and do not ask for an exchange.

"I tell you," asserted de Quéré, "it is the love of France that has wrought this miracle and moulded them to the needs of this war."

And Vaissette, in his heart of hearts, agreed.

The captain added: "They have resigned themselves. They have attained to the resignation taught by Catholicism."

Vaissette concurred.

"They have resigned themselves. I state the fact without drawing any deduction from it."

De Quéré concluded:

"Christianity is the highest expression of thought, and the most practical rule of life in every situation."

And Vaissette—what else could a man do in the trenches?—began to expound:

“Lucretius and his lofty philosophy give us the secret of life. Man is a submissive animal. He submits to the will of the universe and the will of his rulers; and you and I are no less passive than the others. You give as the motive of your resignation the doctrine that commands humility and the worship of the incomprehensible will of the powers of heaven. As the motive of mine, I give my submission to the inscrutable laws of destiny and reason. It would be foolish to resist, and cowardly to complain. My doctrine is that of the Stoics, of Zeno, Cato and Lucretius; yours is that of Bossuet, Fénelon and Pascal. The practical result is the same, since human nature is invariable.

“Whether our respective attitudes admit of a natural explanation or are due to a divine cause, they lead us to the same conclusion—passivity; and so extremes meet. Mankind falls into two classes, those who believe and those who doubt, but the conduct of both has been alike. Explain the world as you please, we can go on philosophising for ever. I only know one thing: we and our men are holding on in the trenches.”

The wind had blown so strong during the night that it had swept away the mists, like dead leaves in an avenue, and cleared the sky of clouds. The stars shone out and in the morning the sun rose.

The evening before, two companies of the 36th Battalion had attacked an enemy strong-point, battered to pieces by our artillery. It had formed a salient, threatening our lines with its machine-guns. Corpses

lay out between the trenches. Looking over the parapet, between the sandbags, you could see them lying on the ground, their blood-stained uniforms bathed in the rosy rays of dawn. The firing had ceased. It was a sight of infinite sadness, all those corpses lit up by the first fiery darts of day.

"How sad," thought Vaissette, "is the vegetation of this plain."

The sudden burst of spring-like warmth and brightness could not lighten the burden of his heart. But all at once there was a whirr of wings, and the wild ecstatic song of larks rising from behind the corpses and soaring into the limpid sky. The field of death was still the haunt of birds; the grave-yard, in spite of all, remained a meadow.

Vaissette felt the burden lifted from his soul, as he watched the larks fly upward into the light.

CHAPTER XIII

IN BILLETS

THE relief had taken place a little after two o'clock in the morning; and the company was on its way out of the labyrinth of trenches, a subterranean town with streets that crossed each other and spread out in endless ramifications. The *chasseurs* walked as fast as they could, for the clay that glued their feet to the ground; they were making all haste to leave the accursed trenches,—such haste that fear took possession of them as a reaction against a month of heroic resignation, a fear unreasoning and horrible. And yet they were half asleep, weighed down in mind and body by the shell of mud that covered them. The night was hardly disturbed by the noise of their feet in the water, their stifled oaths, and the rattle of their mess-tins and bayonets. They came out on a high-road just as dawn appeared, a broad road lined with the trunks of trees broken by shell-fire. These trees were now nothing more than thick posts of unequal height, supporting the innumerable telegraph wires which connected the various headquarters. The melancholy road was *pavé*, and the men took a delight in stamping their nailed boots on the firm ground, which did not give way under their feet; it gave them an inexpressible sense of se-

curity. But their eyes were bewildered by the flat horizon; not the smallest elevation could they see; nothing but interminable fields of roots or corn. They were lost without the mountains of their own country; ill at ease and silent, feeling like derelict hulks tossed about on an unknown sea.

The column trudged slowly on. Angielli chaffed the troops they met, infantry going up to the trenches. He jeered at the drivers of field-guns on the march, and of supply waggons and ammunition columns. The road was one endless stream of traffic.

They saw uniforms of every colour and shape; the races of the five continents seemed to have made this Flemish road a rendezvous. There were gunners with their batteries, light and heavy, anti-aircraft sections, dragoons escorting wretched-looking prisoners, light infantry from Morocco, sailors, a regiment of Hindus; Belgian carabineers and lancers, assisted by our territorial troop, were repairing the damaged road; the tassels on their forage-caps bobbed up and down with every movement and, in spite of their setting, made them look like the warriors of a comic opera of 1830. A long convoy of ambulances was taking wounded to the rear.

The Battalion passed through a village. There were still some civilians in it, and Vaissette was overjoyed to behold these creatures who did not wear uniforms. A group of women watched the *chasseurs* pass, marvelling at their *bérets*.

"They are colonial troops," explained one.

"They are sailors," corrected a second.

"They have taken off the red pompon, which was too conspicuous."

The mules of the fighting transport, stolidly walking along with their ears back and their long coats clotted with earth, excited great curiosity. The column made a short halt at the other end of the village. Vaissette went into an estaminet, a dark smoky room where you could not see clearly. It contained twenty or thirty people who had left their villages on which the shells fell day and night. They persisted in living there, near their ruined homes: a whole race caring nothing for great events, starving and miserable, and yet laughing and merry-making and drinking as at an eternal Kermesse. In the stable a little girl who had lost her parents lay coughing on wet straw, and the cough flushed her fevered cheeks and brought a streak of blood to her poor discoloured lips.

The Battalion entered Langebush. Their billets were not out of range of the enemy's heavy artillery. The ruined spire and the broken walls of the little village pointed gallantly skywards. Very few houses had been left standing; their roofs had collapsed under the slow strain of the ages and the cataclysm of a moment. You seemed to be passing through a town as dead as Pompeii. The population was not to be seen—nothing but wreckage, charred beams and heaps of stones.

The billeting area of Number Four Company consisted of two farms on the outskirts of Langebush. They made the best arrangements they could. It was rumoured that they were to be there for a week, to rest and reorganise the Battalion, and that they would not

return to the line until it was time for the attack. De Quéré came round to look for Vaissette. The men had taken up their quarters somehow or other in the barns and thrown themselves down on the ground which was covered with a layer of straw. There they immediately slept like brute beasts. The captain had not wasted his time. A hundred yards from the road, right out in the open country, he had discovered a little white farm with green shutters. The sun glistened on its front wall, which was half hidden behind apple-trees laden with blossom. The farmer's wife had made a good deal of difficulty about receiving these hirsute and dirty warriors in her house, where the brasswork shone and every room was as clean as a new pin. She had a little servant girl who cleaned the floor every time the captain moved, to remove the dusty marks of his boots. She had relegated her household—men, women and children—to the wash-house, so that they might not soil the interior of her house; and she had only been induced to take in the three officers, de Quéré, Richard and Vaissette, by the promise of large stocks of coffee and sugar, the visible good-will of the batmen, who swore to polish unremittingly, and the personal charm and aristocratic manners of the captain. Finally the matron had given way; she went and lived with her farm-hands in the wash-house, where a huge cauldron of coffee always stood on the stove, and from time to time they would go and fill a bowl from it. The house, so spick and span, was given up to the officers. It was an ideal billet. They could take their meals at ease in the dining-room with its

stately old Flemish furniture, and for sleeping each was to have his own room with a bed and clean white sheets. The prospect was alluring.

The officers sat down to table. These few days were to be a time of relaxation, but still the idea of death was always with them. The thunder of the guns constantly reminded them of it, and they had been warned of the coming offensive. The fields around, in which the marigolds were running to seed and the couch-grass growing unchecked, were torn and pitted with shell-holes, and full of pools of stagnant water, stained with blood. The repose of these peaceful hours did not prevent them from living through all their past sufferings or from fearing the ordeal before them, an ordeal still vague but already hanging over their heads like a sentence of death; the menace of it weighed heavily on every act and thought.

"Why, you are living like princes here. To think the people at home are pitying you!"

This was Lucien Fabre who had just returned to rejoin his company. Both he and his brother officers were deeply affected. He brought with him an atmosphere of spring and youth, a little of the air of the outer world, and in a moment everyone was speaking at once. Lucien knew all the history of the Battalion from Vaissette's letters. Nevertheless everything seemed new and strange to him; only the sound of the guns reminded him of his campaign and made his heart leap with a desire for action.

"And what are they saying there?" queried Vaissette.

"There" was the interior, behind the army area, the mysterious region where there was no fighting. Lucien could well understand the feeling of the warriors; it was the feeling of sailors on their ship, cut off from the world; their whole conversation was of the ship; they would speak of the land as a distant shore from which you were severed by the vast ocean and many months' sail.

"You have come in the nick of time," said de Quéré. "At last we are going to start the decisive offensive. It will be stiff."

"It can't be more stiff than the attack on Laumont," said Lucien.

His companions made no answer, but still looked serious. The captain raised his arm and pointed to the front line, repeating:

"It will be stiff."

"Are they so strongly organised?" asked Lucien.

"I almost believe they have a genius for method. The spirit of order was the property of the Latin nations; we inherited it from Greece who applied it to the field of ethics with Phidias and Plato, and from Rome who applied it to the field of state-craft with Cicero and Augustus, with her orators and proconsuls, her builders of social systems and of roads. We preserved it until the Revolution, and we used it for the welfare of humanity. Prussia has studied in our school and has applied the power of organisation not to moral beauty but to force. She is a powerful enemy." The captain's dreamy eye lit up as he continued: "The battle will be terrible; but our country

and her spirit are eternal. Grace will be given us and we shall win."

"Grace!" asked Lucien, noting with amazement that Vaissette made no protest.

De Quéré replied:

"We have reflected a good deal about this war, while in the trenches, as you no doubt have done in hospital; and Vaissette and I have come to the same conclusion, which is this: Apparently the course of the war is determined by mere chance; in reality, the long resignation of our men and their impetuous spirit when the time comes, are the result of a miracle, and it is a miracle that decides the victory. I believe this miracle to be a manifestation of the grace of God, the grace spoken of by the theologians, by Molina and Pascal. There is 'grace sufficient,' given to all men and nations; let our nation accept it. There is 'grace efficacious,' a sudden inspiration from God, who sends it to us in the hour of need to enable us to perform His will; this grace is His miracle in favour of the land of France."

"I do not believe," said Vaissette, "in divine intervention in human history. The supernatural has no existence for me. But I do believe in a miracle of destiny, a permanent grace possessed by the soil. I mean that what seems to us miraculous, like the victories of Denain or Valmy, by which France was saved, is at the bottom a normal phenomenon, of which we have failed to discover the reason. The reason is the will of the soil to remain French."

He continued: "Like a Stoic, I accept without surprise all that happens, all that is allowed by destiny.

It is the will of destiny that there should be nations. Destiny has raised from the bowels of the earth the genius of Molière, the colonnade of the Louvre, the Faith of the Shepherdess of Lorraine, the mute inglorious obedience of our men, who are willing to die. The nation defends herself. Her instinct leads her to bring forth, in accordance with her needs, a generation of thinkers or soldiers. A permanent miracle is in process—a miracle of the land and people. This is a grace of all the ages, which manifests itself in its fullness in times of stress, whether it emanates from our mountains and rivers, from the land and its destinies, or from some divine power above the land and beyond those destinies—the miracle is the same. Captain de Quéré has said it: Grace will be given us and we shall win.”

Thus gravely did the officers converse. Thus they confessed their philosophy, their understanding of their country and its needs, their acceptance of duty, after long months of war, with so many sufferings fresh in their memories, and on the eve of their supreme act of sacrifice and faith.

“I am dying to see my men,” said Lucien. Vaissette took him round to the two farms in which the company was billeted. He had just ordered an inspection of kit and arms, a thankless but useful piece of barrack routine. Cleanliness was a matter of some difficulty. The brush has not been invented that will cope with trench mud and the black fluid that stagnates in the Flemish farmyards. There is water everywhere—except in the wells, which the peasants empty the first

thing in the morning with their little pumps. The spotless uniforms of the early days of the war were now a thing of the past.

The farmer, furious at having all those troops billeted on him, and not yet understanding what the war was about and why the shells killed his cattle and tore up his fields, had dismantled his pump and taken away the well-rope. He was engaged in a discussion with Angielli, who was threatening to do him an injury.

Lucien's arrival restored peace. The old soldiers crowded round him. There were not many of them. The arrival of successive reinforcements, the departure of the wounded, the evacuation of the sick, the deaths in action—all these things had completely changed the company; it could not show more than a score, at the outside, of the original men. But the spirit, the customs, the tradition of the Company lived on.

Some men had just joined up from the depot, peasants from Dauphiné and the Pyrenees, men of the same stamp as Rousset and Diribarne, who had been killed in action. The presence of these mountaineers and of Angielli, Servajac and Girard his orderly, made Lucien feel as if he had never been away from the Battalion. He found his men perhaps rather slower, heavier, and more passive.

"We knew you would be with us for the big show," said Corporal Gros.

The confidence thus expressed was infinitely dear to Fabre; but it saddened him to observe that all his men

were entirely preoccupied by the thought of the attack, to which all indications now pointed.

Some had scattered about the area; they walked about, idle and slouching, went into the estaminet, or to the tobacco-shop to buy that light Belgian tobacco which burned in their pipes with a smell of straw and treacle; or they would try to make conversation with two or three tall, fair, slatternly women whose language they could not understand—and that made them laugh.

Others, of quieter tastes, were cleaning up their arms, mending their jackets, writing home. The composition of letters had become a habit with them, and was not such hard labour as it had been in the early days. They were reading a newspaper, which roused their indignation, and they passed hard judgment on the civilians at home. The latter do not gain by being judged from the papers, just as the patient humble heroes of the trenches cannot be understood through the medium of the stories in our poor dailies. The sadness and greatness of war are so different from their ideas of it.

“And Marguerite?” asked Vaissette.

He and Lucien were slowly returning to the white house that was almost hidden by apple-trees in blossom. The evening was upon them—an evening of infinite sweetness.

Fabre confessed:

“War seems much harder now.”

“Evidently,” said the other, “the tragedy has touched you more deeply; but nearly all our men are in the

same case; they have left their homes back there."

They met Lieutenant Richard, also on his return from inspecting his company. He was a business man from Toulon, with no particular ideas on morals or politics, but an excellent fellow. He had the point of view of a bourgeois of the reign of Louis Philippe, who had read Voltaire and is naturally a conservative; but in France there is always something of the great soul of Don Quixote slumbering in the innermost depths of these Sancha Panzas. He did not look much like a warrior with his jacket stretched tight over a rotund middle, and it was easier to picture him in slippers than in field-boots. Well, this officer's conduct since his arrival at the front, had compelled the admiration of Captain de Quéré himself.

"It is our homes that we are here to defend," said Richard; "I feel it is so, although at first sight it appears paradoxical."

"Why paradoxical?" demanded Vaissette.

"It might be thought," replied Richard, "that a German victory would not disturb my household at Toulon; it would not lessen my wife's affections, or alter the routine of my house; whereas by risking my life, I risk the destruction of my home. And yet something tells me I am fighting to protect it."

"You are right," agreed Vaissette. "War came into existence for the defence of the home. The first man that ever rolled a stone to the threshold of his cave to keep out the wild beasts or his still wilder fellow-men, created the first fortress and declared the first war. This same impulse of instinct and reason urges man to

defend his house, his town and his country, as in those days he defended his cave." And Lucien Fabre added :

"We are guarding the welfare of the things which really make our home; not only the persons who form our household, but the air we breathe there, the language we speak there, the atmosphere of domestic peace, the history of our dead forefathers, the country-side—even the good French bread we eat and the good clear wine we drink at home."

He understood all these things now, because he had loved.

Vaissette concluded the discussion in a tone of greater warmth, of exaltation almost :

"There is only an apparent conflict between the interest of your family, which is to keep you in its midst, and the interest of your country, which is to have you at the front. Even had there been a real conflict, I should have liked this war to bring us to see that there is a duty higher than our own personal tranquillity and the happiness of those we love. And this is exactly what has happened. We are members of a generation that is sacrificing itself. Fond husbands feel within them a passion more powerful than their love; fathers leave their young sons and face death for the sake of their great-nephews whom they will never know. The living go to the slaughter for those who are as yet not even a hope of life. Never has Man been so great, never has he climbed to such heights."

The two officers listened to Vaissette and dreamed. Lucien heard the clear laugh of Marguerite ringing in

his ears; he saw, in memory, the nights of love, and the rounded shoulder and soft white neck of his beloved. Richard recalled his home, his fair, brave wife whom he loved, the intimacy of all the familiar objects, the furniture which since their marriage had been the witness of his dull work-a-day life and the sacred ardour of his love.

He wanted to tell these strangers all about his wooing, the commonplace struggles of his life, the furnishing of his house; but he contented himself with showing them the picture of his wife. And in the exchange of confidences and familiar conversation there was a touch of the sublime, because these men knew that when in a few days' time, the night of the attack arrived, they would never again be all three together like this; some, perhaps all, would have fallen on the field of sacrifice and honour.

They had reached the farm, where de Quéré was waiting for them. They sat down on a seat under the apple-trees. The air was full of gentle melancholy.

"We were just saying," explained Vaissette, "that only those who love can really feel the inward tragedy of war. The pity of it, that man is subject to duties more imperious than the duties of love. The tragedy of the events of our age proves that long hopes are not for us. I am reminded of dear old Horace, who said to Sestines:

"Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam."

"War shows as the human truth of his doctrine and the great ideas that pervade it—the indifference of

Nature, the dignity of man, contempt of death. We know now the frailty of our transitory joys and the caprices of fortune, and we have learned to look upon our approaching end with a calm will and a mind above emotion."

"Henceforward," concluded Captain de Quéré, "we know from our own experience the ugly and the beautiful features of war. Nothing short of the return of that sublime barbarity could teach us to die for an idea. I am not a prophet and I don't know whether the time will ever come when men will cease to be idle, brutal, covetous and violent, when good manners and justice will consequently rule the world and wars cease to exist. I don't know whether the sun will ever rise on the day when all the nations of the world will awake to their endless misery and devote their energies solely to the progress of the arts and harmony between nation and nation. Meanwhile the sacrificial horrors of the battlefield will have taught the nations the virtues of self-sacrifice, enthusiasm and discipline."

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRISONERS

VAISSETTE and Captain de Quéré watched a convoy of prisoners marching along the road. They were a piteous sight as they walked by, hanging their heads for the shame of their captivity, trudging heavily, for their big boots were full of water. The same stupor weighed down their burly shoulders and was written in their stubbly faces and furtive eyes. Their clothes were torn and mud-stained. None of them wore the famous grey helmets so hated by our men; they all had those little peakless caps that convey so little idea of glory. Mere human cattle!

The escort of gendarmes halted; a non-commissioned officer herded the prisoners into a barn. The *chasseurs* contemplated their enemies without hatred.

"I can't help feeling sorry for these men," said Vaissette.

"War is one great sorrow," agreed de Quéré; "we are all brothers in Christ."

"And yet I hate them. They set out to amaze the world with their crimes and they succeeded. They were seized with a drunken lust of destruction, and while yet in their sober senses they practised misdeeds which could only have been excused on the plea of

drunkenness. Germany was once a centre of civilisation; by her toil she contributed to the progress of human thought; and then, all at once, her genius, diverted to this mania of murder and pillage, has brought us back to the days of barbarism, reinstated the powers of unreason and misrule, and set back the clock of humanity. And yet there really was a Germany such as Madame de Staël saw. Genial, gold-spectacled professors did gather after dinner in the quiet towns of Thuringia and Saxony to enjoy their music and their beer. There were stout fair-haired housewives, who practiced the cult of their homes. Young folk still strolled of a Sunday under the scented limes on the banks of the Rhine. The Werthers and Charlottes were not all dead in the land of the Teuton. . . . We might have believed in eternal peace; we might at least have believed in a loyal war. They have committed every disloyal act, and so thoroughly have they carried war to its logical conclusion, with all its details of horror, that they have covered themselves with dishonour. They have revived the days of barbarism; I hate them, for their war is a murderous attack upon the civilisation of the world."

"You take it too much to heart, Vaissette," said the captain.

He was very grave and his eye seemed to be fixed on something beyond the horizon. He felt the other's heaviness of heart for all his disappointed dreams. Vaissette added:

"Man has never been so cruel to man. I can't be-

lieve now in human progress; humanity is worse than ever."

"Don't forget your history," replied de Quéré; "we are no better, but we are no worse. We are men like those who lived in the days of Pericles and of Dante, ages of tragedy which yet gave birth to imperishable things. As yet we have been neither able nor willing to illuminate our minds with the light of Him who is the Sun of Justice. Patience, His hour will come. Don't be discouraged; remember we are working for it. Those who have been through this cursed war will feel the want of more gentleness both in manners and in heart. So much nobility and so much suffering have been spent upon this age that it will be able to discover *some* truths; for truth is discovered only with the heart and through suffering. The things of the intellect are sterile, the things of the heart alone possess a reality that bears fruit."

"So," said Vaissette, "if France conquers and we die, it will not be in vain."

"Be assured of that, since you do not share my hope of the resurrection. Consequently, while you hate our enemies, do not blush to be sorry for these prisoners; besides, they are disarmed!"

"Look at our men," said Vaissette; "they show curiosity, but no aversion. They feel that they are looking at wretched human creatures who went to the slaughter with a courage as strong and devoted as their own. The pity of it, that a generation at war perceives the nobility of the enemy only when they meet to kill each other. Our men long for hecatombs of

enemies and make no distinction between rulers and people, whom they hate equally. But while they hate the people, they pity the man. Patriotism inspires them; they are the heroes and avengers of their country: that does not prevent them from feeling that what separates them from their enemies is a transitory hate, while that which unites them, their misery and slavery, is eternal. They forgive them in the depths of their heart, just as the earth, the very source of patriotism, gathers the bodies of all her enemies to her bosom."

"I too," said de Quéré, "forgive those, who, like our own men, have had the strength to die. They died for a bad cause, but they believed in it and died believing. They revived the barbarities and excesses of times long past; but they rushed on to the slaughter with a faith gloomy, resigned, passive, trembling and obedient, which inspires both you and me with respect and pity."

An ambulance had halted. The stretcher-bearers, with infinite care, were taking out a wounded German officer.

"Two bullets in his stomach," explained an ambulance-man. "His number's up."

He was quite a young man. His face was already livid and the light in his big blue eyes was growing dim.

De Quéré and Vaissette went up to him and spoke a few words of consolation; but the Prussian officer did not seem to understand.

Vaissette spoke to him in German, and he smiled faintly and after an effort:

"Triste guerre, monsieur!" said he.

Again he smiled. The words were pathetic in the mouth of the dying Prussian.

With a gesture of sublime pity the captain took his hand and held it between his own, as if to help him to die. A red foam rose to the prisoner's lips, and he repeated softly in a kind of sing-song:

"Triste guerre, monsieur, triste guerre!"

Vaissette spoke in tones of deep emotion:

"You will be well cared for, in the South of France."

But the Prussian shook his poor head to signify that he was not deceived. He had closed his eyes.

Suddenly he opened them with one last gleam of life, and repeated in a stifled murmur:

"Triste guerre, monsieur, triste guerre!"

CHAPTER XV

THE ASSAULT

WHEN the Battalion marched out of Langebush by the *pavé* road which led toward the trenches, the men were oppressed by a gloomy weight of melancholy, although they did not know that they were on the eve of the final sacrifice. The Major had called for the officers and warned them: "We shall attack tomorrow at noon precisely. Objective: the enemy trenches two hundred yards ahead of our own. Say nothing to the men till morning."

But the men had a presentment of the impending tragedy, and gazed with a kind of apprehension on the houses of the village already blurred by night and mist. Would they ever see houses again? Their march was a march to death.

It was a long and weary way, but at last they turned into the open. A sergeant and two men were waiting to serve as guides through the trench system to the attack positions. They entered the first communicating-trench with a sudden sensation of dropping into their graves; already they had cut themselves off from the world, they had crossed the threshold of Hell.

"This is the place," said the Sergeant after half an hour's march.

One by one the men came into the muddy trench.

"Thank you," said Fabre.

The troops relieved, moved off in silence. The officers handed over; Vaissette reconnoitred the sector, which was a hundred yards in length, with Captain de Quéré on his flank. He himself posted the guards and sentries.

The guns were thundering, sending their shells to and fro with a broad rhythmical regularity. You might have imagined they had breath.

Fabre had sought out de Quéré, Richard and Vaissette. Sleep was out of the question. They would have liked to snatch a few hours, but how could you sleep in those terrible vivid hours which are the last of your life? The men, too, were all awake. Only the machine-gun officers in a neighboring dug-out was dozing; he was not taking part in the attack. Lucien felt madly jealous of him, and was ashamed of himself for it.

"The hours drag," said he.

He had felt a violent shiver run through his body.

No one answered. Men are not talkative at such moments. It was the solemn hour for squaring accounts with your conscience or your religion. Fabre tore up two letters from Marguerite so that they might not be read after his death; the little flame of the candle consumed the flimsy sheets. Richard whispered to Vaissette: "It's not so hard as they think." And he smothered all weakness by these words uttered in a

tone of irony at once pathetic and resolute. Vaissette wrote to his mother the letter that was to be found in his pocket.

"I die happy because I am allowed to die for France." De Quéré stood at the entrance of the dug-out and smoked in silence. A great light shone in his soul.

He stayed there with Richard when Vaissette and Fabre went back to their headquarters. The shelling on either side was growing more intense.

Once more they were in the midst of the battle-thunder; already they could scarcely hear each other.

"If they had any idea," Lucien shouted into Vaissette's ear, "how terrible it is!"

"They" were all the people who had not seen war, all those who can hardly imagine the horrors of it, those to whom the destinies of nations are committed, all those for whom they were about to die.

The day broke. Lucien called for his platoon commanders and gave them their instructions for the attack. From that moment he kept moving up and down his trench. He could hardly speak loud enough to be heard; it was enough to smile at one of the men, to give a cigarette to another. They were also putting their papers in order. Servajac, silent as usual, was sorting old soiled letters; he was evidently looking for something. At last he found it—his own photograph. In a free impulse of comradeship he took it and gave it to his officer. Angielli bashfully grasped the lieutenant's hand as he passed and held it in a long pressure.

They were working to relieve the strain. Six

o'clock! A long weary wait! Vaissette was passing the time by counting, with the aid of a sergeant, the shells that fell in their wire. Some of the men were improving the firesteps and the steps cut into the trench by which they were to rush out upon the shell-shaken No Man's Land. Now and again you would be spattered by a shower of earth and stones thrown up by an exploding shell.

Away in the distance, Langebush had been a mark for the enemy's long-range guns and was on fire. Looking through his field-glasses, Vaissette, could see the Chapel, the Town Hall and the Market in flames. He thought of the little white house in which they had lived, with the apple-blossoms in front.

The French shells passed just high enough to clear the parapet and swept down on the German lines. The dust spurted into the air as if thrown up by giant shovels, and unceasingly shell after shell buried itself in their lines.

Just in front of the trench a mine went up. The explosion was almost inaudible in the deafening noise of battle. A heavy yellow smoke, tinged with gold, rose slowly towards the sky, more dense than the smoke of shell-bursts.

With a shout for volunteers, Vaissette rushed towards the crater, climbing out of the trench, running across the short space of open ground and dropping into the gaping hole.

A few men had followed him, and they made for the further end of the crater, the enemy end. Prussian infantrymen were advancing, now crawling, now

bounding from shell-hole to shell-hole. The battle began—almost a hand-to-hand fight. Vaissette and three men threw bombs at the attacking party. Batisti, close to his officer, used his rifle, and every shot killed. In the rear they could hear the volleys of rifle-fire with which Fabre was supporting his subaltern. From the trench a narrow and shallow sap was being hastily dug to connect the crater.

“Ten o’clock! Two more hours before zero,” thought Lucien.

The French shells were passing closer and closer overhead. The effect of them must be appalling. They were falling so thick that they were not exploding on the ground but on a carpet of steel and brass splinters.

The melinite threw up huge columns of earth; the German line was one long volcanic crater; the earth as it heaved to each explosion was one vast seething cauldron.

Vaissette was still holding out in his crater. Bullets were flying all round him, humming like tops; rifle-grenades and aerial torpedoes were falling. The explosion of these last rent the air with a crashing detonation that rose above the general din. But there were a goodly number of corpses round him. Batisti and those of the *chasseurs* who were left had thrown down their coats, rifles, and packs and were fighting in their shirt-sleeves with their brown haversacks stuffed full of bombs. These they threw at the Prussians lying in front, who stubbornly preferred death to retreat. Two Germans had broken into the crater and lay there weltering in their own blood.

At last the sap on which the men had been working under fire was finished, and the crater was organised for defence; but it was never attacked again; the enemy had no men.

Captain de Quéré, who was commanding the two companies, came to take stock of the situation. It was eleven o'clock and all must be in readiness. Fabre's features were tense and drawn. As for Vaissette, he was black, black with powder, from head to foot; the sweat pouring down made white furrows on his face; and there were clots of blood on his clothes and skin. He was still in a kind of stupor, from the physical energy he had expended and the strain of the bombardment. He addressed Fabre and de Quéré, shouting at the top of his voice so as to be heard, but failing to recognise his comrades.

Angielli, his clothes in tatters and covered with blood, was running round and round the crater, gesticulating wildly, striding over the killed and the wounded who could not stop his interminable career, and shouting in frenzied laughter.

He had gone mad.

Vaissette came to his senses. Earth and sky were shaken by the roar of battle; but the time for attack was drawing near. Every man felt it, with a thrill of dread. Their ears had now grown so used to the noise of the explosions that they could hear each other speak.

Captain de Quéré shouted: "It is eleven-thirty. I have Battalion time. Set your watches by mine. At twelve o'clock, without further orders, attack."

He was absolutely calm.

Smiling he grasped the hands of Vaissette and Fabre, and said:

"Mes amis, vive la France!"

With these words he left them. His tall straight figure disappeared down the trench.

The men were showing signs of impatience. A feverish excitement was beginning to take the place of their stoical resignation, as though some demon had entered into them. They were looking over the parapet at the objective, where our shells were still raising columns of earth and smoke.

"How short," thought Lucien, "is that little space we have to cross!"

"Which of us two will get there first?" cried Vaissette.

They wagered a bottle of champagne, as if it had been a gymnastic exercise.

Only twenty minutes more! Twenty minutes more to see the sun piercing the clouds, to move, to hear the sounds of life and the shells. The stretcher-bearers had come up into the communicating trench; the men shivered at the sight of them. Instinctively they had fixed bayonets and were calmer; one felt that a great wave had passed over them.

It was time. Lucien shook Vaissette by the hand. They dared to look each other in the face; not more than once in a life time do men exchange such looks. He left his friend to take his place at the head of Number One Platoon.

The *chasseurs* were correctly lined up in the trench.

"How fine they look!" murmured Lucien.

Once up the steps, he would be in the open. The violence of our guns was turning to the fury of madness. The air trembled with the continuous roar.

The German guns were roaring, too, and the bullets from their machine-guns formed a network as they skimmed the ground. How could any one leave the trench? It was not the buzzing of insects this time, but the hissing of thousands of reptiles. Fabre was so daring as to stand on the step with his head and shoulders emerging from the trench. The sight that met his eyes filled him with admiration. Livid with excitement he watched Captain de Quéré, standing motionless on the parapet, leaning on his stick. The hearts of all his men thrilled with admiration at the sight.

Twelve o'clock!

"For the assault," cried Lucien; "pass it along. Advance!"

Vaissette opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground. He saw the sky. Never had it seemed so serene.

"How blue it is, that sky!"

He tried to move, but could not. He was pinned to the ground. He heard no noise; the battle had died down. Two passing stretcher-bearers saw the life in his eyes.

"Lieutenant Vaissette," said one, "here we are."

He could not answer. The soldier continued: "Don't make yourself stiff. We are going to put you on the stretcher."

They had bent down over him.

With an effort, Vaissette murmured:

"Have we taken the trench?"

"Their whole line is broken; we are in pursuit."

Vaissette smiled.

"And Lieutenant Fabre?" he asked.

The stretcher-bearer frankly confessed:

"He is killed."

"Ah!" breathed Vaissette, still smiling.

He was prepared for the worst.

Again he spoke:

"And Captain ——"

There was a sudden rush of blood from his wounded chest to his throat, which choked his utterance. Presently he added:

"—— de Quéré?"

The man repeated:

"He is killed."

Once more Vaissette murmured "Ah!"

The men were stooping to raise him.

"Leave me," he said, almost inaudibly.

Still smiling he repeated:

"Killed——"

Then he added:

"So am I."

His eyes had closed. There was a rattle in his throat and a last shudder ran through his body. He opened his eyes once more and with an effort murmured, as he closed them for ever:

"But France lives on."

Boston Public Library



3 9999 05406 8687

